

AURORA

by evan como

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Summary: Will Cordy remain Angel's Promissory Girl or will she be forced to let him die?

1. Default Chapter Title

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>
Historical Note: The action in this story takes place before "The Ring".

>
Author's Note: I wasn't really going to say anything--so unlike me since 'Starlet'--but I really wanted to comment on trying to put this story together...

>
Hard. Difficult. The Tuesday after 'Cherub' was posted (I think that was, pretty much, the time frame) "The Ring" aired. Well, I was stuck because I couldn't go forward if I'm trying to adhere to the character/story chronology that exists within the show. I should go spoiley to avoid writing myself into corners, but I can't; so I had to get over THAT little feeling of having the rug yanked. Big time.

>
Episode after episode aired and I kept getting 'Jossed' (thanks, T). Then, 'Disruptor' took over my life and Wesley wouldn't get out of my head. Without Cordy's voice I couldn't move into this story. The outline was ready, but she just wouldn't show up. SO like her, ya know? The rest of the season ended on me and chewed up my plot in various places. When Forrest spoke one of my lines verbatim, I wanted to give up. (a tear forms... so long, Forrest...)

>
And, then the strangest thing happened. This story. It is, essentially, the same story I was going to write from the get-go. You'll notice much of the themeage of Buffy/Angel going on in it. 'Starlet' and 'Cherub', in addition to being about Cordy/Angel separation, are also about the demon world in transition and about 'Prophecy'. What Doyle did. Not what a scroll says, but what one

individual's sacrifice did to set his friends' world on end.

>
Needless to say, Cordy finally decided to hit her mark. Wesley still wouldn't go away, but that's Wesley's terrier nature, isn't it? He's a scrappy guy, to say the least. And instead of feeling like Joss and David G were out to get me personally (because that would make me, like, seriously delusional), I realized they sorta put a stamp of validation on where I've been going and what I've been doing with their precious characters (which would still make me delusional, non?). So, here's a quick shout-out to the almighty Creative Team.

>
Lastly, I want to say how wonderful it's been to hear from you readers. I've been corresponding with some of you and others of you have just peeked in my e-box to say how much you're enjoying my efforts. Wow. Just, wow. So, this story is actually dedicated to all of you. I hope it doesn't disappoint because you've all put some mighty huge expectations on me. If I did this right, it's gonna get pretty intense. Just a warning to get that Kleenex box ready.

>
This is longer than any of my other stories and there are a tonnage of themes running through it. I figured you all wouldn't mind since the season is over and summer is here. (And you've been waiting soooooooo patiently.) There are OFC's galore, plot devices and all kinds of goo-gah. 'Aurora', as the end of the trilogy, should be the end of my arc, but I still might pick up some of the ideas later on. The standard disclaimer applies regarding affection AND, most importantly:

>
This wasn't written to offend; it is purely for entertainment. Mine, to help me beat stress. And yours too, from what you've been saying to me. The dialogue? The characters really do use their own voices.

>
OK. I've stalled long enough. gulp Here goes the finale of the trilogy... Curtain rising... Audience, hushing... Monitors brightening... Towers humming... Author, sans nails, seriously needs to start breathing again... e.c. 17 jun 00

>

>*****

>Prologue:

>The Ancient Lords communed with the silence, listening intently. The taller of the two, also the older, closed his eyes to concentrate more fully and his brow creased with disapproval. But the silence was adamant and, in the end, he reluctantly agreed.

>When the younger Lord placed his hand upon his companion's shoulder in a show of consolation both beings paused to consider the gesture.

>"Even within us, change has begun."

>"And, if we are lucky, perhaps it will not have been too late."

>The Ancient Lord snorted cynically. "'Luck', young one? Does the folklore of the Promised One influence you, as well?"

>"Many things, Senior, influence me now." He took a moment to study the group at the memorial as a light late-evening breeze wafted through their shrubbery screen. "If Our own time is as limited as the Auguries have seen, I open myself to possibilities."

>Considering those words, The Ancient Lord found he harbored envy for such open-mindedness. He related his feelings, self-reflecting as he did so on being able to even distinguish them at all.

>The Young One allowed an optimistic smile to bisect his crooked mouth. "Do you believe he'll appear? Prophecy has rarely traveled so

closely to conclusion. Will he reveal himself?"

>A shiver of anticipation traced the Elder's spine. "After uncounted centuries he has yet to do so again," he sighed heavily to fight his increasing discouragement. "Why would this occasion demonstrate a difference?"

>Nodding towards the subjects of their observation, the Younger answered, "because for the first time ever within Prophecy, we have a few of them on our side, Lord. The Warrior dies but they remain loyal to him; to his fealty."

>"Our servant remains loyal; however, continued human involvement cannot be predicted." The Lord studied Whistler carefully trying to discern if even the diminutive creature was still faithful. "Do you think Rathrachemae will be revealed? Before its purpose is lost to The Warrior?"

>"I do not think, Lord. I BELIEVE."

>Reaching forward, the Elder cupped his hand above the Younger's chest, amazed by what he detected there, envious again. "Then I hope your faith is mighty enough for us all."

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>AURORA by Evan Como

>Cordelia Chase, aspiring actress and almost-former office manager at Angel Investigations, paused to stretch, lifting her youthful face to the starry night sky as she did so. Somewhere, she knew, was the constellation for her birth sign and she tried to remember what her daily horoscope had been. It didn't matter, of course. That was the previous day and it was already in the early hours of a new one.

>The midnight blue next day.

>Taking a deep breath, she leaned back against the marble pillar base of Doyle's monument and let the stone's coolness seep through her poncho. The natural lumens seemed to float overhead as the earth made its silent revolution. Cordy couldn't actually remember when she last noticed stars in the Los Angeles night sky or the last time she even bothered trying to find them. There was always a reason to look outward, hardly ever up and the blinking lights of a jet as it rounded for approach to LAX disturbed both the view and her concentration.

>Wesley Wyndham-Price flashed a half-smile of embarrassment as Cordelia glanced at him suspiciously.

>"Why do you keep staring at me, Wesley?" Reaching into the picnic basket Angel packed, Cordelia pulled out the baked potato chips. Munching, she scolded him, "I've been back for almost a week already, you know."

>"Me, too," Harriet Doyle chimed, attempting to rescue Wesley from an awkward situation. Both he and Cordy seemed different, but she couldn't place why that was. Studying him, she added, "I got back the night the police found the most recent body in those serial killings."

>"Cordelia got back the night before," Wesley responded, impatiently waiting for Cordelia to offer the snack bag; but when she continued to ignore him, he plucked it away.

>"How many does that make?" Whistler asked, amused by the working duo's exchange. (He couldn't blame Wesley for staring at Cordelia; she was absolutely radiant tonight.) Taking a bite from his sandwich, he swallowed before continuing, "eighteen? Since December? You like your murderers prolific here in the city of Angels."

>Passing the chips to Whistler, Wesley responded, "You realize, none of us actually called Los Angeles home until recently. I don't think we should be considering L.A. ours yet."

>Harriet nodded semi-agreeably as she sipped her Snapple. "Although,

I think it's an unwritten rule once you rent, you're officially a resident. Sorry, Wes, Cordy. We're all transplants now."

>"I guess that means me, too. Not that I rent, but since Angel's training I've lived here more than any other place." Whistler sighed, a little melancholy for mentioning Angel's name. "Hard to believe that was only a few months ago," he added solemnly.

>"The fight against Lusus. Yes, Gali-- Gale told me about it." Twisting completely around, Wesley managed to avoid Cordelia's scrutiny to point up the hillside. "The battleground was just up there, wasn't it?"

>A few on-lookers distracted Harry as they passed the memorial site. "I remember that time." When Wesley whispered their culture of origin to her, she smiled her appreciation. "I could certainly use you at D.S., Wes. You know, whenever Angel..."

>She held her breath. "Sorry. It's still so hard to think of him as the same being who destroyed a giant, you know. He must be in awful shape right now."

>"Actually, you can't really tell," Cordelia explained lackadaisically. "He almost looks exactly the same except the fever has him kinda rosy. It's a little bit strange. I mean, pale he looks so, like--"

>"Striking," Whistler finished for her.

>"I would venture more like 'distinguished'," Wesley corrected.

>"Hello? Gay-fest, much? You guys!"

>Cordelia's wide-eyed exasperation made Harriet chuckle softly. "Remember Doyle found 'something' about Angel, too, Cordelia. We all do. I, personally, find him sensuous. Those smoky brown eyes..."

>As she let her comment drift, the four continued their picnic in silence, each to their own reflections regarding the absent chef.

>After a short while, another group of demons passed along. One of the children handed Cordelia a length of plant along with a flash of his snaggle-toothed grin. When she graciously received the token, he excitedly ran off to rejoin his family who all waved at her from afar. Cordy professionally returned the gesture.

>"So the legend continues," Harry commented. "I still can't get over how quickly Francis' story has traveled the globe. And now, with news of 'The Warrior's' heroic efforts to rescue imprisoned demons despite his own capture and illness..." She shook her head languidly, uncharacteristically forlorn. "Rosemary, Cordelia. It's a grand display of admiration to gift someone a branch."

>"To their culture, 'aluthmanec'--hope. Actually, it's their offering of hope for Angel." Wesley exhaled sharply as he folded his arms across his chest.

>Scooting over, as Wesley pinched the corners of his eyes beneath his glasses, Harriet leaned her head against his arm. "I tried, Wes. It was too much to take on with such limited time. The Visioner. Rathachemae. None of it--I couldn't even scratch the surface! Even you couldn't decipher the oral stories."

>Whistler glanced briefly at Cordelia who was staring into her lap at every leaf she had nervously scraped from the now-bare branch. "Gale's Warrior--"

>He paused before continuing. Knowing Angel had given him the capacity to recognize suffering as his three human companions tried to maintain their composure. "Gale's Warrior, the night Angel fought Lusus, explained his culture's version of Prophecy. That he believed Rathrachemae to be an object of immense intensity, blinding radiance--"

>"Like the sun?" Cordelia huffed in disbelief. "Oh, THAT'S just great. Like, POOF! You're saved! Oops, our bad. You're DUSTED!"

>"Cordelia," Harriet called softly. "Or a beacon." Casting her teary glance to the sculpture towering over them she choked, "oh, my God, Francis. What did you really do?"

>"No way! Angel would have been killed, too!" Cordelia protested loudly, violating the bleak tone of their discussion. "It wouldn't have saved him! It would have--"

>"Disfigured him." Wesley caught her eyes and nodded once. "Angel, in his demon persona, would have been much stronger than Doyle ever could have been. Yes, Angel would have been very severely wounded, but not something--given his immortality--he wouldn't have eventually recovered from."

>Closing her eyes, Harry envisioned those wonderful eyes peering from behind a hideous mask. "His access to humanity--" she whispered with acute awareness.

>"Or A human, in particular."

>The three looked at Whistler as the full impact of his statement took on its true meaning.

>He continued, "Gale's Warrior figured Angel would fall to defeat because his culture believed Rathrachemae was already lost. Angel should have never been able to defeat a Scythe demon, no matter how fine his fighting form was. The Powers That Be don't understand him, They've never understood him, and that scares Them." Looking around, Whistler lowered his voice conspiratorially, "They only have access to the demon, not to his soul. He's dying now, of course, but Their concern had been that, at some point, he would disappear from their view--like Doyle did right before he leapt or like Cordelia is to them now, even with The Gift."

>"Then, They would have had to hope Rathrachemae would never come into contact with Angel," Harry ventured.

>As Cordelia considered the comment, her dark curls trembled against her shoulders. "Harry, remember what you said, 'without Rathrachemae The Warrior falls'?" As Harry nodded, Cordy turned her attention to Whistler, closing her teary hazel eyes to him before nodding.

"Without The Warrior, We fall, as well."

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>"Remember what you said, 'The good fight,' yeah? 'You never know until you've been tested.' I get that now."

>Doyle reached back before swinging his arm around, then launched his fist with the hope of connecting with Angel's jaw. He wasn't overly optimistic about the attempt and when Angel quickly bobbed sideways, the blow never landed. The awkward move was used, instead, as a means to send Doyle onto his back.

>"OW! What the hell?" Shaking his head rapidly, Doyle raised up on his elbows as the better brawler crouched to meet him.

>Smiling at his friend, Angel asked, "what did you think, Doyle? I was just going to let you go out there and do MY job? No way!"

>The casual smile became a less-attractive expression as Angel transformed into demon self before rising to leap at The Scourge's weapon of decimation. Cordelia's plaintive 'no' carried across the background noise as Angel reached for the device's electrical cord.

>The pain wasn't half as bad as he anticipated. Angel had been burned before, but nothing like this. There was a clean, almost calming effect as the flesh began to melt from his skeleton. His strength waned with his concentration for a moment, and then...

>The beacon fell dark.

>Angel toppled from the platform to the deck below. The rapturous Lister demon families rushed him, their enthusiastic gratitude encircling him. As the first ones approached, their cheering stopped abruptly. And row after row of anxious beings hushed in horror, their faces filled with a mixture of pity and devotion as they took first sight of their gruesome savior.

>Covering his hideous features with what remained of his arm, Angel searched upward to find his friends; to see Doyle take Cordelia into his arms and kiss her passionately, a blue light heralding the final consummation of his long-suppressed affection. Despite the gnawing pain, Angel attempted a smile, only to be reminded he no longer possessed the ability to display one. His guts wrenched when he lifted his hand and examined the bones devoid of their fleshy covering, charred. His naked fingertips clicked uneasily against his jaw.

>Cordelia's scream diverted Angel's attention from what he had done to himself and he refocused his watery vision on her. She stood there on the cargo hold mezzanine, sobbing into her hands as Doyle was ripped from her embrace, yanked away from her--from both of them--by two monstrous mobsters. A second later he heard that sound--the unmistakable sound he had heard far too often over the course of far too many years...

>Doyle's head twisted brutally away from his spine and the break resounded throughout the stifled room before the body crumpled, lifeless, to the floor.

>"So, you see," Doyle concluded in his spirited Irish brogue, "it wouldn't have mattered in the end, Angel. I was a dead man either way you put it. Saving the Listers? I redeemed myself, man. And you stayed pretty."

>Angel cringed. "Why didn't you let me help you? It didn't have to come to this. Any of this." Doubling over, he wrapped his forearm across his stomach and began to groan.

>"...so I'm figuring, you'll be able to put the profits into a few mutual funds and, even though it won't grow in leaps and bounds like if we were day-trading-- Just think of the commissions you'll save that'll compound; not to mention not having to worry about figuring out capital gains... Although that's not really a problem until the IRS starts going after the undead. But, better safe than jail bound. Just ask my Dad about that! One day, when you're all better, you'll be in the position to move to better digs. You know, a nice prestigious location, more Beverly Hills adjacent. Although, maybe Beverly Hills won't be such the hot spot in the next century."

>Angel sat across from Cordelia and attempted to make sense of her droning, but the scarring across the left side of her face distracted him. There was still a great deal of healing that needed to occur before the crusty scab beneath her non-existent cheekbone was fully healed. He began to grimace, reminded by the effort most of his own face was still missing.

>As Wesley glanced at Cordelia's diagram, a facial tic rippled the muscles below his eye causing it to water uncontrollably. "She's qu... qu... quite th' Dow Joneser," he lauded about their associate with his British accent heavily slurred. When he jerked his head sideways to return her smile, the extensive track of stitches running across the shaved area of his skull were visible.

>"What happened?" Angel gasped to the pair seated before him.

>Wesley's tea sloshed over the edge of his cup as his left hand lifted it towards his lips. "Angel?" Taking a sip, he deciphered the cryptic question. "Oh, no worry. Soul's there. Did what you HAD t...

to--"

>"Yeah," Cordy impatiently cut him off, shrugging her apology as she continued, "I guess SOME people need their helping hands to be a little easier on the eyeballs."

>Angel was at a loss for their non-explanation. "Cordelia," he wailed, "your face--"

>After acknowledging his frustration, Cordy left the kitchen area to return with a full-length mirror from the bathroom. She leaned it against the apartment's supporting pillar before helping a shaky Wesley rise and motioning for Angel to come.

>"See, Angel." She pointed to their reflections. "I wonder what the new one's going to be like," she mentioned into Wesley's good ear as she absently scratched behind hers.

>"L... l... let's hope NOT satanic," he chortled. "Still take me to th' plane t'morrow?"

>"Of course, Wesley. But you're still coming to watch Angel try to move Dennis? Right?"

>"Moving Dennis?" Angel asked, bewildered. Looking into the mirror, he studied the three of them. All of them with their dark hair and height and appealing features, flawlessly beautiful as if there had been no horrific accidents. He couldn't take his eyes off Cordy's and Wes' reflections; it hurt too much to imagine he had been unable to protect them.

>"Angel!" Cordy scolded. "You promised! You know I can't start moving in unless Dennis can, too. And I can't start economizing until we get him settled because he's MY ghost. He belongs with us!"

>"I don't--"

>"Get it?" Doyle shook his head in wonder. "You're the brightest guy I know, Angel, but sometimes you can be dense as a board. How do you see them? Not for what they are, but who. Like you saw me. Saw past the low-life half-demon scumwad who just trooped into your life and took you over. Made me feel like a human being for the first time in... YEARS. Almost a decade, man. You do the same to them and they're happy to return the favor."

>Angel disagreed, "but you weren't what you thought you were. You were just confused." He looked at the duo and experienced an immense degree of loss. How much he missed them even now, and how much he would continue to miss them.

>For all eternity.

>Doyle patted Angel's bicep, distracting him from the somber thought. "It might not be as bad as you're expecting it to be--" When Angel cut a wary glance his way, Doyle dropped his hand and gaze. "Never could pull one over on you, huh, man? MIGHT not be though, Angel."

>"I failed so miserably. Everyone. Everything. Such a waste of time." When the scenery changed, Angel reeled. The Coffee Spot only helped to emphasize what he already knew. "Tina. I failed her. I failed, Doyle. I couldn't even save one woman..."

>"What failure, Angel?" Doyle shook his head in disbelief as he sauntered to the table the unharmed Cordelia and Wesley were seated at. After studying Wesley for a moment he set his vision, lovingly, upon Cordelia. Sighing, he continued, "I failed, Angel. What was I waiting for? God, she's so beautiful!"

>"Oh, well..." he lamented, shifting his attention. "You didn't fail, Angel. Maybe you didn't do everything you could have--you just ran out of time. So, what little you have left, spend it with them. They need you."

>Angel disagreed vehemently. "I ruined both their lives."

>"You SAVED both their lives. BOTH of them. Mine, too. Promised One."

>"Stop calling me that! I'm NOT the Promised One; just an insignificant piece of shit." Disgusted, Angel loomed over Doyle and visually pushed him into the empty chair next to Cordelia. "I never was any good to begin with and I never could be. Who was I trying to fool?"

>Doyle eagerly reached for Angel, obviously dismayed after his friend swerved from the embrace. "Love, Angel. My God, man. It took me forever to realize what it really is and I died too soon after I found out."

>When Angel began to back away, Doyle rose to lean an elbow against the high table. "It IS unconditional. Not an 'eye for an eye'. You give of yourself and you reward yourself just for the act-- No matter who. Even if it's only yourself."

>"But I'm so not worthy." Angel began to retreat into the waiting shadows, away from the light and his friends and back to where he knew he belonged. But Doyle ran to whirl him around straight into the oblivious figure of Wesley who, like Cordelia, was desperately looking around.

>"Dammit, Angel. You can teach so many others the lesson, why can't you learn it yourself? They're waiting for you, man. YOU. Because you belong with them, not there," Doyle lectured, sweeping his open palm at the umber- and charcoal-colored miasma attracting Angel.

>"I don't understand," Angel responded, honestly confused. "Tell me what it all means," he begged.

>Displaying that wry smile of his caused Doyle's bright blue eyes to gleam with mischief. "It's poetry, Angel," he replied cryptically.

"Sheer poetry."

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>"...and this latest one makes number nineteen," Wesley answered as he tossed his burger wrapper in the direction of the wastebasket. The skyhook banked nicely off the wall before swirling around the inner rim of the container to nonchalantly drop in. When it became apparent to him Angel hadn't noticed, Wesley ditched the pride in his accomplishment.

>Realizing he was ignoring Wesley, Angel struggled to direct his attention from Cordelia's activities. Sipping from a heart-rimmed white cup through a straw and with her curly brown tresses spilling from under a novelty kerchief, Cordelia looked much younger than her almost 20 years. Her lack of eye-contact granted him the privilege to keep gawking.

>"I've been doing the same thing," Wesley cited. "I don't know why I can't take my eyes off of her. As if, in her absence, we have to make up for all the lost minutes we didn't see her. It's the oddest sensation because she looks exactly the same as she did before she went auto-show hostessing."

>Angel contemplated Wesley's assessment. "She IS different, Wes. That's what we're trying to figure out. Or maybe we're different. You know, alot happened during those six weeks..."

>Feeling his cheeks flush, Wesley let the subject drop. Blinking for a long moment, he could sense Angel's presence despite every attempt to ignore it. "Yes, perhaps we're different."

>Laughing, Harry clapped her book closed and added, "we're ALL different, Wes, Angel. 'Things don't change, we do'." She continued to smile through a thought. "Who knew a Junior High School graduation motto would have such a prophetic effect on one's life?"

>"Look, you two," Angel began as he rose before the office door actually opened, "You've both done more research and investigation on trying to find 'my cure' than anyone should have. Let's just call it and accept the inevitable. And, Wes, I think it's your turn to grab

40."

>Wesley's fatigued senses seemed to automatically shut-down at the mention of rest. The morning Cordelia commented her mouth tasted like she was 'chewing on pennies all night', Angel had insisted they sleep in shifts to avoid being included in the vampire's uncontrollable and degenerative dream state. The spillage had taken on epic proportions--layers upon layers of visions overlapping and twisting through one another; the wisps being either excruciating horrifying or completely unintelligible.

>But, when Wesley witnessed Whistler's arrival after rising from his chair, he couldn't help but follow Angel and Harry into the foyer. Sleep could wait its turn until his inquisitive nature was appeased.

>"I told you I'd see you in the hall," Cordelia hissed at the little demon through her fake smile.

>"I know, but..." Whistler stepped forward to accept Angel's outstretched hand. "Hey, Angel. I didn't expect for you to... well... you know..." Pushing his sportsman's hat a little further forward, he abandoned his attempt at decorum. "I didn't realize you were still up and around."

>Angel took no offense. "Not earthy yet, Whistler. Cordelia's still convinced she's not going to let me die. What's up?"

>"Up?"

>Angel's brows crossed as Cordelia moseyed back to her desk and tried to appear busy. She had rarely been able to look that part, and the fact their last case closed the previous day didn't help. Sometimes she was just a terrible actress.

>"Yeah. You're here, why?"

>"No reason," Whistler's answer a lie when the door flew open behind him.

>Angel's focus narrowed in concerned recognition. "Mahoe."

>"Warrior Angel." The slightly shorter, broader-shouldered demon squinted at the vampire condescendingly. Other than the jaundiced tone of his pimpled flesh to give him away, Mahoe could have almost passed for human. His manners were distinctly demonic, though. Abruptly he ignored the agency's namesake and everyone else in the room. "Well, is she gonna or not?" he rudely interrogated Whistler.

>"Do what? Whistler?" Angel studied the two demons carefully before turning his attention to Cordelia. "Noooooooooooo...."

>Rushing to Angel's side, Cordelia flashed her famous pageant smile. "Angel..."

>But Angel brushed her aside. "You can't. Please, Whistler. She can't."

>"Cordy?" Harry took the rejected younger woman by the shoulders and peered into her face, searching deeply for some understanding. "Oh, no. You don't have to do this. Remember what Whistler said last night..."

>Cordy squirmed from Harry's grasp to back behind her desk. Ignoring the expectant faces of everyone around her, she merely picked up her cup and began to sip from it while resolutely peeking out of her window's blinds. From the corner of her eye, she saw Wesley approach.

>The sideways glance she cut was so severe Wesley lost all will to advance any further. He quickly noted Angel's expression--the vampire's outrage was matched only by his fear--before speaking his mind. "Cordelia, you could have waited until Angel was gone," he admonished, barely above a troubled whisper.

>As if on cue, the cup dropped from Cordelia's hand, exploding upon

impact. Instantaneously, she lay sprawled on the linoleum in the center of the spill writhing in pain as the Vision for her new Warrior relayed its painful message.

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>"Warrior Angel."

>The female Oracle motioned to the male, finding it difficult to look him directly in the face either. Instead of perfecting her ruse, she turned and ventured back through the archway to wait.

>"Your visit... Surprises." The male bowed his head and absently adjusted a fold in his tunic before inspecting the vampire. "You are looking..."

>"Like death." Angel almost completed the simple two-word comment before a barely-audible 'oh' escaped his lips. "You can't have Cordelia. She's human. This isn't her fight. She has no allegiance to you."

>The male cautiously approached the perspiring visitor. "It was her option, her decision. She has accepted her role graciously and We are in her debt. Please relate to her our sincerest appreciation."

>"HER decision? She's still a teenager! And you're, what? Hundreds? Thousands of years old? Hundreds of thousands? What does she know about making this kind of decision? You had NO right! I'll fight you--"

>"HOW?" The female hissed as she stomped forward, her displeasure more than apparent. She smirked when Angel nearly lost his balance. "How can you fight at all?" she asked contemptuously. "And besides, I do not recall ever hearing such protest when she became YOUR Messenger."

>The truth was brutal and Angel conceded to the destructive criticism.

>The male was not without pity, though, and he stepped between his counterpart and the distraught lower being. "Her decision, Warrior Angel. And when she decides she no longer wishes to be Our Messenger, We will abide by that decision also."

>"Then I'll have to make sure she makes that decision. Soon."

>"That is your prerogative, but she is much stronger than you give her credit for. Her mind will not be an easy one to change, which is why We are grateful," the pair explained. Angel's silence confirmed their appraisal of his human Messenger's tenacity.

>"While you are here..." the male began tentatively.

>"Just say it," the female spat. "Get it over with. Now."

>After swiping across his forehead with his palm, Angel lowered his fingertips to his hips and inspected the two beings, intrigued by the odd exchange. They were usually only really testy with him, never to one another.

>"Your untimely demise has left the matter of your retribution up to discussion; and, it has been determined your debt will remain unpaid."

>Angel accepted the statement humbly having long ago resigned himself to always being in arrears. He wondered, briefly, whether to ask about the exact reasons why he had been recruited into service for The Powers That Be. But ultimately, he realized as dread began to wash over him, there were far too many crimes to pick any few and an emptiness ushered every emotion away except one.

>Fear.

>"No matter how often your decisions were impulsive, The Powers That Be have determined your intentions were forthright. Because of that, you will be allowed to die as Warrior with what little retribution

you have made held in place against what awaits you when your existence ceases. As a general rule, you would be destroyed at this moment, but in deference to your humans we will allow you their customs regarding your ultimate demise."

>"You're dismissing me," he deduced without emotion in his voice.

>"Yes and no, Warrior Angel." The female's harsh features diminished as she reclaimed her position next to the male. "You are being released from duty. As Warrior. But mind you, what is left of your existence is in a precarious situation and still subject to Our control. We would suggest you not tarry with the matter of your parting. Even now The Auguries detect that which calls out to you and if you give in to this forbidden hunger, the crimes of Angelus will be ten-folded and your soul cursed. Do you understand?"

>"Hell."

>The male shook his head 'no'. "Far worse than hell, Warrior. Your human soul, sentient, held hostage by the ultimate demonic curse for all eternity. There is NOTHING you can imagine that could be worse."

>Angel reflected on the statement, knowing the Oracle beings would never understand what could be worse even if he tried to explain it. With nothing else to discuss, he merely accepted their decree and exited.

>"There. Are you pleased?" the female's voice was biting as she lifted her face and her palms towards the ceiling. "He has his final command."

>The Elder Ancient Lord stepped from beyond the farthest arch. Although the antagonism disturbed him, he saw the reason there in the female's face. Her expression was no different than the one he had detected on Whistler all those months ago and he granted her the passion, begrudgingly.

>"It is to be seen whether he has the strength to carry out his directive. He has failed so many times in the past that I hold no optimism for his follow-through."

>The male Oracle being couldn't disagree. "Still... Lord, if he ceases to exist with his Warrior status still in tact, with his soul in place--" He caught the female's eyes and took her silence as encouragement to continue, "should We not only take that which We were created to govern?"

>Astonished, the Elder Lord considered the two beings carefully. "Allow him to die a mortal man?"

>"Reverse the fold of time," the female answered.

>"And what will this prove?" the Ancient Lord asked incredulously. "We cannot erase all that has occurred these many months. What you are suggesting--"

>"What we are suggesting, Lord, without disrespect, is that We remand him to the laws he lives by. The laws his soul attempts to obey."

>"He is demon."

>"We take only the demon. He still dies. But he dies mortal."

>The silence roared in Their minds and The Others fought to express their own opinions on the subject--one that had obviously been in debate for quite some time. The Ancient Lord, overwhelmed, silenced Them all. "And what if He refuses this one Our judgement? Have you considered this, also?"

>The Oracle male and female stood side by side against their Lord and nodded affirmatively. "Then his death will confirm all he has ever suspected," they answered in unison.

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>As Angel prepared to leave his apartment, it came as no surprise it was Wesley descending the staircase. He exchanged a quick hello before moving on to the library alcove to explore the desk there.

>"What did the Oracles say?" When Angel didn't answer him, Wesley claimed a seat on the last step to watch the search. "Cordelia eventually explained it was her choice," he finally added.

>Angel sighed and tucked a couple more papers into his envelope. "That's what they said, too." He glimpsed towards the ceiling before closing the drawer. "I know I wanted you to go back to Council, Wes--"

>"I'll do what I can, Angel. You know I will. As will Harry. And Whistler promised, also. But, Cordelia is very headstrong. We both know that. I'm just afraid she won't allow me access to her life after you're gone."

>That was discouraging. "As long as you let her know you'll be here for her, Wes, she'll come around." The disenchanted grin he offered did little to assuage Wesley's opinion. "Look, I've got to go."

>"But." Rising, Wesley accepted there was no way he could restrain Angel if he really wanted to leave. Even near death, Angel could still be remarkably strong-- In very short bursts. "You'll... Be good?"

>"Yeah." Wesley's concern was touching as the two walked to the tunnel entrance. "When I stopped feeding after Cordelia got back I, pretty much, lost my appetite. I think I can go the night without being chained. And the two of you can get some normal sleep."

>Holding the grate up as Angel exited the apartment, Wesley also held onto his uncertainty. "I can wait here, you know. If you need me to."

>Angel almost tapped the man's hand before stepping down. "No. Don't stay here. Why don't you spend the night at Cordelia's and I'll see the two of you there pre-dawn. I'll bring bagels."

>"Rugelach? You know, Cordelia likes rugelach. The ones with the mini chocolate chips."

>"Rugelach," Angel echoed as he dropped unsteadily onto the tunnel floor, wishing he had time enough to bake them, himself.

>-0-

>"He wants me to spend the night at your place and then he'll see us in the early morning," Wesley explained as he began to assemble his papers and the books he'd taken from the downstairs library. "You've really hurt him, Cordelia. I hope you know that," he added without turning around.

>Cordelia tch'd after yanking her bag from her desk drawer and slinging it across her torso. "What's with you, Wesley?" she asked from Angel's office as she turned off the light in the restroom there, beginning to shut the office down. "You've had this whole 'Angel-vibe' going on since I got back and--"

>"Ohmigod!" Cordy suddenly appeared at Wesley's side and he nearly fell over when she excitedly reached around his neck. "You didn't let him bite you, did you?"

>After Wesley batted her investigative hands from his collar, she began her ridicule. "That demon chick. You DID do it with the demon didn't you? And she put some whammy hex on you to turn you demonlicious. Wesley!" she mock-scolded, cackling, "what if the Council could see you now? You know, I realize how much you want to

be just like Angel, but no one's coming to interview you for 'Lifestyles of the Doomed and Lifeless'!"

>"Fuck off, Cordelia." Wesley scooted his satchel back onto his shoulder and held the door open as she exited. "Your flippancy is tacky and I'm not going to allow you to get away with skirting around the repercussions of your actions. Key?"

>After turning the latch, Cordelia leaned her back against the door's window with her arms barred across her chest. "You did it with a demon and you're the one who's got his head so far up a vampire's butt you can't remember what daylight looks like and you want to take everything out on me? Nuh-uh. Angel may not like my decision. He may not agree with it. But, eventually, he'll understand it and know it's right. I've got their Gift and they need me, Wesley. You're just jealous 'cause they don't need you."

>When she caught up to him just before the building's front doors, Wesley offered, "you have this way of making the world seem as if it can't revolve unless you allow it to, Cordelia. And we're all caught up in YOUR magic and the wonder that is YOU. You have no clue what happened while you were gone. Angel misses you. And you're ignoring him. I applaud your sudden change of heart where maybe someone else's needs are more important than your own. Maybe eventually I'LL even understand why the decision you made was the right one. But, for right now, it is poorly timed and cruelly intentioned."

>Cordelia blinked a few times. Wrinkling her nose, she rebutted, "I don't know what I ever saw in you, Wesley. You are just-- WEIRD! What does a movie have to do with demonic forces overtaking the city?"

>Disgusted, Wesley swept past her, finally outdoors. The brisk dusk air felt good in his lungs as he drew an exasperated breath. "I hope you do a better job of acting when you audition for that play next week," he snidely remarked as she took a couple stairsteps before him.

>She came to a standstill.

>With her hands on hips, Cordy's full temper was engaged as she swiveled to finish spewing at him. "Oh, Wes. You can't accept that NO ONE wants you, can you? Council. Me. The PTB. I bet DemonGal left town because you weren't worth losing her looks over. Feeling wounded, much? But that's no reason to trash my acting skills."

>"Your PRESUMED acting skills, Cordelia. Because if you really were any good, I wouldn't just be bleeding internally."

>-0-

>After sliding the envelope onto the coffee table, Angel leaned over and placed his lips gently against the apple of Cordelia's cheek.

"Where's Wes?" he asked as he rose.

>Her hair, bundled haphazardly into an elastic cloth on top of her head, exemplified Cordy's confusion as her head swayed from side to side. Nothing made sense.

>She observed Angel exchanging a brisk handshake with Wesley before the taller man leaned forward for a warm half-hug. With his hand on the doorknob, Angel deposited his keys in Wesley's palm after joking about his box being a big-enough puzzle to keep Wesley busy for a lifetime. Then, the pre-dawn light drifting through the living room window brightened to fully illuminate the manila-colored packet lying before her.

>That's when she shrieked.

>As Angel began to pull the door, it slammed back into its frame. Irritated, he glared towards the living room ceiling and bellowed, "Dennis! We talked about this! So help me, I'll incant your

transparent ass--"

>But before he could finish the sentence, Angel detected the blur of Cordelia's figure as she rushed at him wielding one of her few coffee table books high above her head. He tried to move defensively away from the swing, only to feebly pitch directly into the advancing binding as it slammed across his face.

>The sound was deafening as Cordelia's weapon of choice made contact and the thud resounded in Angel's ears as everything in the room skidded to a slow-motioned pace. The pain the strike produced was unlike anything he'd ever known--perhaps because he saw it coming. His lower lip razored across his teeth, an almost audible grating of flesh torn asunder. Unfortunately, he couldn't tilt his head fast enough to avoid swallowing the developing swell.

>Wesley rushed towards Angel as the terror-stricken vampire began to drop forward. But Cordelia cut off his access and he was left to helplessly watch, horrified, as his friend slumped to the carpet where the wound began to discharge a putrid fluid--all dark-brown and filthy, of inconsistent viscosity after finally being depleted of its existence-maintaining properties.

>Angel had fallen with his palm pinned between the carpet and his chin. Using his forearm to push up, dry heaves took control of his motor functions as he stared into his hand. The substance in its center was the only visual proof that made his anticipated death a reality--a clump of what had been, for one short year, Their blood.

>His bond with Angel waned briefly before catching Wesley's breath. He would have done anything at that moment to put an end to the pathetic scene unfolding before him. But ultimately, any sacrifice wouldn't have made a difference, being no possible substitute for Cordelia or her apologetic care.

>Through the clarity of their torment and with the stench of death permeating the room, it dawned on Wesley--all of it. How brave Angel had been while his body internally decomposed; how strong to deny the intensity of his cravings to provide some relief for the agony; how helpless now as his determination to end his existence had been dispersed by one misguided act of endearment.

>Dennis began the clean-up almost immediately and Wesley stood there. Useless. Unneeded. Unwanted. Leaning against the door, he took his time to slither down next to them, so apart despite being in physical contact with them both. Angel there with his head resting against Cordelia's lap as she cooed, while Dennis swabbed at the hemorrhaging wound.

>The absent protectress had reclaimed her charge.

>A year. A year and nothing had changed in the least. Even the vampire was again at Death's door. Wesley was still irrelevant in a certain young woman's life and, as always, excluded from everything happening around him. At least, now, he had enough experience to recognize his dilemma instantly instead of requiring months for bleak introspection.

>His mind a blank, but hardly quiet, Angel stared at the expanding rectangle of sunlight in the center of the room with longing. The only pleasant aspect of his freshly-spurred hunger was how completely it protected the two humans. Whatever was left of his digestive system contracted as his self-revulsion also grew--over having neither the strength to satisfy his hunger nor the courage to start crawling forward.

>Cordelia smiled appreciatively in the direction of the hovering sponge as Phantom Dennis finished scrubbing. The room had dimmed considerably when the mid-day sun swept across the southern sky behind the outer wall they were resting against. As he rocked side to

side in time with her, she turned to regard Wesley.

>"That song. My Gramma liked it alot. She used to hum it, too."

>Wesley stopped humming before he opened his eyes. "HMMMMMMM? Oh. It's a largo by Handel'. Obviously it's quite popular," he replied softly, relaxed.

>His comment confused Cordy until she realized that, with a scattered voice not completely off-key, Angel had continued the tune. "Hey, Angel," she whispered, encouraged, "you're humming. I though you said you didn't hum. Whassup with that?"

>The song abruptly ended when Angel adjusted against her legs. Her panic almost caused her to miss his explanation about how happy he would be if he wasn't feeling so miserable. "WESLEY!" she cried out as Angel's eyes rolled into the top of his head. "Ohmigod! You have to do SOMETHING! He's burning up!"

>Sighing, Wesley retrieved the icy cloth from midair as Dennis immediately came to the rescue. "I don't know what you think I can do for him, Cordelia," he replied matter-of-factly, not immune to the worry apparent in her glistening eyes. As Angel's convulsing body flopped against the floor, he pulled Cordy's hands onto the vampire's chest.

>"You can do magic," she sobbed, Angel's body continuing to jerk wildly despite her best efforts to hold him still. "There's GOT to be a spell for this. Right?"

>Exchanging the towel for a fresh one from Dennis, Wesley shook his head regretfully. "I'm afraid Angel's quite beyond magic at this point, Cordelia. What he needs is a miracle."

>Wesley gasped when Angel's eyes snapped open but his excitement subsided quickly after deducing Angel was far from coherent. Even though Angel's eyes were locked on Cordelia while she mopped his forehead, there was no recognition in their brown depths. The scene, already tragic enough, became unbearably so as Wesley's heart, laden, nearly ruptured after Cordelia naively questioned, "magic. Miracle. Aren't they both the same thing?"

>-0-

>Exhausted, Wesley handed a cup to Cordelia before joining her at the kitchen table. The tea was absolutely tasteless, but he didn't care. Sipping it was something far more productive to do than wallowing in frustration. He took a cookie from the center plate, impressed Cordelia had bothered to share her 'secret stash'.

>"You should have let him die when he had the courage to do it himself, Cordelia. Angel's fever has decreased after the cold shower and fluids, but..." Wesley shook his head. After removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes, he directed his remorseful grey gaze to her in hopes she finally recognized the gravity of Angel's situation.

>"You're just jealous because all he gave you were his keys and the box," Cordy replied venomously, biting her cookie with such vengeance the chocolate coating completely crumbled onto the table.

>"I'm not always misguided by the pettiness you seem to think I possess an abundance of, Cordelia. His keys, huh? What's his car without him along for the ride or this apartment without him to make it a home? And that damn box... His possessions mean absolutely nothing to me. This isn't even about the tokens of his affection. My God. His quality of unlife has to be taken into consideration at this point."

>"Oh, and you don't think that's not what I've been considering?" When Wesley heaved his doubt, she continued, "no matter how bad Angel feels, even one more day surrounded by the people who care about him has got to be better than ONE in hell."

>"Hell?" When the tea and cookie went to war, Wesley had to concentrate to keep from experiencing the outcome.

>Cordelia's accusatory facade eroded as she reached across the table to his hand. "Wesley," she began, "you didn't really think Angel's gonna be able to go where the real angels sing, did you? He's still a demon, no matter how easy it is to forget sometimes, and he's probably gotta go back where he came from."

>After catching himself subconsciously nursing his lip, Angel readjusted his position and kicked the sheets away. He felt his temperature fluctuate from the simple activity and he lay back, completely still as it lowered. Trying not to concentrate on his voraciousness was an effort in futility as he began gnawing again.

>Pushing the wound aside with his fist, Angel allowed it probably wasn't going to heal. That alarmed him to some extent, but not as much as it should have. He derived a sick satisfaction from the taste of the decay and, as a familiar voice wafted through his mind, he pondered the probability of hearing himself if he became his own victim.

>"Good. I was going to suggest you just go ahead and chain me now," Angel spoke as Wesley stepped into the room. "Maybe just an arm. It won't take long and then you guys can go home." As Wesley took a seat on the edge of the mattress, Angel adjusted himself again. "It's not like I'm going to chew my way to freedom," he joked, trying to hide his mortification when the comment actually appealed to, more than disgusted, him.

>"Wes? What's wrong? You should be used to this by now."

>"Cordelia informed me you'll be returning to hell. Is that what the Oracles told you? I thought--"

>"Nothing's changed, Wesley. They didn't have to say anything. I already knew, you know... Well, actually, I really don't know exactly what's gonna happen. I only know it's gotta happen soon. In fact, right now wouldn't be a such a bad time?"

>Wesley grimaced at Angel's plaintive face. Angel, understanding as always, shrugged imperceptibly to Wesley's unspoken refusal.

>"Just say it, Wes." Angel propped himself up against the wrought-iron heading while Wesley primped a pillow behind his shoulders. As he drank from the glass Wesley offered him, it struck Angel odd how sometimes he was able to understand human beings so well and other times he was so clueless. Examining the pained expression on Wesley's face, Angel would have preferred his usual density at that moment.

>"What, exactly--" Wesley fidgeted and replaced the glass of water on Angel's bedside table. "--do you believe in?"

>The tone of the conversation could have gone either way Wesley realized as the question left his lips. Angel exuded amused wonder--he was genuinely touched by the anticipated gesture. That provided some reassurance as Wesley added, "I thought I could help you set 'matters' straight?"

>"Come to save my soul, did you?"

>Wesley hadn't anticipated the refined Irish accent accompanying Angel's reply and he hoped he concealed his shock. "Please, Angel. Don't make light of the situation."

>"Wes. Wesley. I appreciate the gesture, I really do. It's unbelievably kind and... And sweet. But I accept my crimes and I'm willing to do the penance for them. Whatever that may be."

>"So, you're willing to ask for forgiveness?"

>Angel weighed the question carefully. "No."

>Concern, as Wesley grappled with the connotation of the simple answer, prompted Angel to continue, "I've done horrible things. Human. Demon. I'm not sure there is pardon for a demon. And even if there was..."

>"You could ask, though."

>"At the eleventh hour? All of a sudden 'I'm sorry' and everything is 'OK'? No. I think not."

>The detection of Angel's journal nestled between the mattresses prompted Wesley to think of 'the box' and he began to lose his composure, reflecting upon how ill-equipped he was to actually persevere with what he was attempting to do. "Don't get upset. Just hear me out. If you believe--"

>Angel's attention span torqued and he looked past Wesley. "Cordelia?" he called out, listening carefully.

>The sounds of a Vision in process drifted in from the front room, recognizable by Cordy's muffled voice as she was seized by another painful episode. The expression on Angel's face morphed from concern to fury and when he returned his attention to Wesley, his gaze was steely, his attitude uncompromising. "I DON'T believe what you're trying to do. What God would do THAT to Cordelia? Do this to you?"

>Wesley swallowed. "Do what to me, Angel?"

>"Screw you so unrelentingly."

>A moan squeaked out before Wesley hung his head in admitted defeat.

>"Don't sit there and start praying for me now," the barely-recognizable voice seethed. "In fact, the only thing you should be doing--besides putting me out of my misery--is dissecting me."

>"What?!?" Wesley, dazed, was also appalled. "Dissect you? Angel!"

>"It's not fair their side has all the information. And, let's face it Wesley, I KNOW it's crossed your mind at least once. You know, if you could even do it. If it's possible. It would make a great addition to the notes you've been keeping on me."

>"You're insane, Angel. I would NEVER--"

>"THEY did it. Bits and pieces at a time." Absently scratching his forearm, Angel swallowed hard, savoring the distinct flavor of his saliva. "I was unconscious alot of it, but I know it was happening. Maybe there's something in me that could help the fight. Because demons are coming, Wes. Big demons. Little demons. Demons a la mode. Demons on the half-shell."

>"But you're alive, Angel. It's like you're asking me to harvest the organs of someone who's still living."

>"I'm not ALIVE. Do it. C'mon," Angel taunted. He leaned forward to stroke Wesley's arm emphatically. "Why won't you do it?"

>Needing to flee, Wesley stood quickly and peered down his nose at Angel in an attempt to display his ethical superiority. "Because I have much more respect than that for the dead," he replied, unable to suppress the sorrow in his voice.

>His eyes sparkling with derision, Angel laughed. "Alright," he conceded, "you want to save my dead ass and send me to heaven while the rest of you go straight to hell. Where's the logic in THAT, Wyndham-Price?" He waved his hand in dismissal. "Go, Wesley. Go take Cordelia upstairs so she can give Warrior Mahoe his almighty message."

>Wesley acknowledged the young woman's faint cry as he briefly considered the definition of 'bravery'. "I'll be back down

later--"

>"To chain me? No. Don't bother. In fact, until you're ready to make an incisive decision, I don't EVER want to see you again."

>-0-

>The detailed message, complete with a circled Thomas Brother's Guide, lay spread across Cordelia's desk. As Warrior Mahoe examined it, he blatantly ignored the Messenger. His hostility continued to elevate.

>Whistler snorted. "If you're going to be a Warrior, Mahoe, then you have to take on ALL assignments. You can't pick and choose because you're insulted when they don't meet your expectations. This still needs to be handled and you're the one who's gotta do it."

>"I don't touch gnomes," he reiterated. "Send the vampire. I bet he doesn't have any standards as long as they're killable."

>"Rookie," Cordy mumbled under her breath as she plopped into her chair. It only took a split-second to realize she'd been a teensy bit too loud.

>Tossing Whistler aside, Mahoe roared as he rushed Cordelia's desk. Cringing, she expected the worst, only to find herself waiting for an attack that never materialized. When she cautiously opened one eye, she saw why.

>Wesley was in the way.

>"Move back, human, or I'll take you out, too!" Despite Whistler's hindrance, Mahoe lifted his brawny arms menacingly, his wrath causing his face to take on an orangey hue.

>But Wesley, unperturbed, merely sighed after pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. "Go back downstairs, Cordelia," he suggested. When she didn't budge he sighed again, not the least bit surprised.

>Dropping a shoulder, Mahoe managed to escape Whistler's grasp. His violent roundhouse only connected with air when Whistler backed up then under the attack, his shorter stature his advantage. In less than the blink of an eye, the massive Warrior crashed to the floor when his balancing leg was pulled from underneath him.

>"ERRRRRRRRRRRRR."

>"You DON'T hit the Messenger, Mahoe. And you DON'T threaten humans! Got that?" Whistler straightened the collar of his vividly-patterned Qiana shirt
before nudging the still-growling demon. "Now get up and go do your job!"

>
Mahoe glared sideways at the insolent young woman who placed the instructions inside the map book before dropping them onto the floor. The toe of Whistler's shoe was a less-than-gentle reminder to cease the confrontation. After rising, he bent down and swiped up his imperative before storming out the office, leaving the front door wide open behind him as his only option for dissension.

>
"I thought you were supposed to protect me!" Cordy screamed at Whistler.

>
"Look, Cordy, he's been warned and after I report him he'll probably never try to attack you again."

>
"Probably?" she echoed, flabbergasted. "Thanks, ever so, for THAT confidence-building interjection."

>
"Adverb."

>
"What, Wesley?"

>
"Not interjection," he corrected. "Adverb. Whistler used 'probably' as an adverb."

>
The sound she made was not unlike Mahoe's as Cordy rotated and stared down Wesley's throat. "Are you calling me STUPID, Wesley? Because I'M not the scrawny human being who stood in front of

Humongour, The Furious. I mean, I appreciate the fact you were willing to take the first blow for me, but you were gonna get your ass pulverized."

>
"It might have proven far less painful," Wesley exhaled before retreating to the refuge of Angel's office.

>
Imagining the dejected human could feel Cordelia's animosity searing through his back as Wesley took his seat in Angel's chair, Whistler spoke quietly, attempting to calm her while she scowled through the louver windows separating the two offices. "Look, Cordy, Mahoe's NOT Angel. He's a real live, pure-blooded, DEMON demon despite the fact he resembles a human being. Bur'Turl demons are mean, but they get the job done. If there was any way I could have gotten you assigned to a different Warrior..."

>
After puffing an errant strand of hair from between her eyes, Cordelia refocused on Whistler. "You think I'm wrong, too. Don't you? I should stop being a Messenger."

>
"As an envoy for the PTB? No. As a demon who has some inkling of how heavily the odds are stacked against Our side? No. But, as someone who's gotten to know you and admire you and to... Well... Like you, you know, personally? I think when the opportunity arises for you to get out, you should." He interrupted when she began to voice her opinion, "even though you're part of the humanity this war will eventually affect, YOU have no place in this fight."

>
They stood for a moment, sharing the awkward silence. He could detect that while, perhaps, she wasn't weighing his words they were being filed away for future reference. That alleviated some of his concern as she turned away, granting him permission to leave.

>
Cordelia listened to Whistler shuffle through Angel's office on his way downstairs. When the stairwell door opened, she half-expected to feel a wave of the vampire's presence sweep up and throughout the offices. Holding her breath, she closed her eyes and waited.

>
And waited. Then, frustrated, she gave up.

>
The connection she and Angel once shared--the same one that broke 7 weeks prior--had yet to return. She just couldn't feel him anymore; not from the outside, not from within. And, despite the acceptance of a new Warrior, her feelings of loss for Angel's presence weren't lessening.

>
The former offices of Angel Investigations were just ordinary. Sure, she had done a nice job of furnishing them on the agency's initial meager budget and, with the blinds open to the midday, there was a sunny ambience. But gone was the uniqueness, the wonderful enchantment that had always made it a pleasurable place to wake up and come to.

>
Because Angel wasn't there.

>
Taking her chair, she surveyed the outer office she had once shared with Doyle. It was pleasant to remember the devastating paper-wad fights they had engaged in or the silly conversations over countless cups of coffee. Or the endless hours they had put their minds together over how best to motivate Angel out of his funk-of-the-week. She missed the rank attempts at flirtation that still caused her to smile whenever she looked over at his desk.

>
The desk that Wesley moved into.

>
Wesley had become an acceptable substitute. No. Replacement. And once the ex-Watcher finally started getting his act together, he had become way more useful. Business was better with the addition of Wesley. Evil-fighting was easier because he had the expertise to help Angel out with that kind of stuff.

>
And Wesley seemed to make Angel content. Wesley made Angel happy.

>
Even though Cordy was still wary whether Wesley was ready to put a stake in their boss, he seemed to really care about Angel. Alot.

>
The corner of Cordelia's mouth creased when Wesley got up to return downstairs. She knew she should apologize for the harsh things she had said, but in her heart she felt he deserved them.

>
At least for a little while longer.

>
-0-

>
He studied the pacing vampire. Angel, though of diminished vitality, was still recognizable as the creature Whistler had trained to defeat Lusus. That beautiful, tormented predator was stalking before his eyes and he held his immortal breath against the unknown.

>
"TAKE THAT GODDAM GIFT OUT OF HER HEAD!!!" Angel ranted. He stopped, panting unevenly. A fingernail was rabidly chewed away while he stared at the little being.

>
Angel's voice seemed to reverberate throughout his form and Whistler waited for it to subside. "They've tried, Angel," he explained honestly. "But either it won't come out or she won't let it go. And, until that happens, as long as she's willing..."

>
After listening to something Whistler couldn't hear, Angel prompted, "it's all been a lie, hasn't it?" he asked quietly while thumbing the side of his nose. The action left a smear from his finger's erratic oozing after having lost its nail at the quick.

>
Whistler looked at Angel quizzically. "No, really Angel. They've tried--"

>
"I... I... I... was so easy. Such an easy target." Angel's shoulders heaved as he lifted his face to the ceiling, his questioning tone heavily cynical. "Would it have been so hard to do this alone? I could have. I should have made myself try harder. Just ride out the loneliness long enough and maybe I could have gotten used to it again..."

>
Attempting to console Angel, Whistler slowly approached the deteriorating being for some visual explanation but before he could touch Angel's arm a wave of pain shocked through his system and made him sway. The intensity of the rebuff scared him to no end.

>
"...but, no. When Doyle showed up... Anything to keep from spending time in my own dismal company. I wonder how often you all had a good laugh at how simple I made it to walk in and just take over. And then Cordelia?" He bit another nail, spitting it at Whistler condescendingly. "Wasn't she the icing? Someone I already knew. I HAD to protect HER. I thought I was protecting Doyle, too. I thought he was MY Promised One."

>
Whistler's quick confirmation of Wesley's descending figure didn't distract Angel's tirade. By now, the being was too immersed in his thoughts, oblivious to anyone else in the room.

>
"Yeah. I fell for the 'oh, you can show us how to be better demons, Angel' schtick, too. Anything. To keep from being a demon myself. Sure, I'll show the demonic world how to gain access to humanity. Here, it's EASY! You just try to be polite. And then you make people trust you like this-- I let The Powers That Be right in through the back door. Made it soooooo easy to do. Taught them how to do it. 'Here they are, just go ahead and start your massacre.' With ME leading the procession."

>
"What's going on?" Wesley whispered to a shrugging Whistler.

"Angel? What's wrong? What can I do to help?"

>
Angel blinked. Two painful times and stared at Wesley without recognition. "What's rehabilitation for a criminal! I wasted humanity with a soul--popped in from hell to finish the job. Looks like the End of Days was just waiting for me to take my place in front." When he tried to take another nail, Wesley held his forearm. "You better suit up, little human; I think it's gonna be rough."

>
Wesley disregarded the initial painful shock of his reach only to have the vampire, by sweeping away too quickly, careen recklessly away. Instinctively moving forward, he secured Angel before they stumbled back farther and, looking into Angel's eyes, he detected the worst.

>
"I. AM. DEATH."

>
Angel spoke, his voice rancid, directly into Wesley's face, with concentration so severe Wesley cringed. The vampire, wild-eyed and trembling, chewed ferociously on his opened lip. As Angel wrung the hem of his tee shirt--the wife-beater soaking wet, discolored with rusty stains--Wesley listened to hear what Angel was listening to; searched to follow his shifting focal points.

>
But his efforts were futile.

>
"YOU tried to save me by dangling salvation in front of me--as if it was ever available to ME? No one's death redeemed MY sin. I am Sin," Angel whispered before re-exploding, "I was created for one thing and one thing only--to destroy mankind. I was a fool, human, to think I was anything else. A demon? NO! More. EVIIIIIIIIIIIIIL! I was mastered from the bowels of ancient hell to destroy this place. You. And your kind."

>
Wesley shook his head as he pushed Angel into one of the leather club chairs. "No, Angel. That's not you. You were born human and possessed as demon."

>
"He did that far-away thing when he was training for Lusus, too," Whistler spoke near Wesley's ear as they waited for Angel's spasm to end. "Scared the shit out of me. Think I should get a stake handy just in case?"

>
"Please, Whistler. Just go get Cordelia," Wesley pleaded, never lifting his eyes as he rent Angel's tee in an attempt to bandage the bleeding thumb. "We can't afford to have him lose what little sanity he has left."

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2. Default Chapter Title

AURORA by Evan Como (part two)

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>
"You should be downstairs, too," Harry commented, setting the take-out coffee container on the edge of Cordy's desk.

>
"He doesn't need me," Cordy lamented as she lifted the cup to her lips. Out of habit, she blew through the sip hole of the lid even though experience had taught her it wouldn't make a difference. Nothing made a difference anymore. "He's got Wesley and there's nothing I can do for him Wesley's not already doing."

>
"Except be you."

>
Harry smiled wanly at those unhappy hazel eyes looking up and they exchanged a half-frown for camaraderie. Fingering a brunette ringlet behind Cordy's ear after taking her seat, Harry studied her companion carefully.

>
"How's it feel to be all alone, Cordy?" When she ignored the question, Harry continued, "somehow you've managed to alienate

yourself from everyone. You've just been incredibly mean to Wesley and now you're leaving poor Angel hanging as if you hate him, too."

>
"I don't hate anyone. Most of all, not Angel," Cordelia protested. "But he was the one who sent me away. And while I was gone, Wesley made the moves, so..." She slumped to finish the sentence before raising the cup to blow again.

>
"You didn't have to go. You know that." The bashful way Cordelia sulked proved Harry wasn't incorrect with her assumption. "But I think you wanted to test what it was going to be like on your own again. And you did OK. There's no crime in that, Cordy. I think you owe it to Angel, though, to let him know you're going to be fine without him as your safety net."

>
"But then he's going to want to die," she explained. "He's going to make me break my promise."

>
Sympathetically, Harry reached forward and placed her hands on Cordy's knees and, without thinking, began tracing the jacquard pattern embellishing the hem of the younger woman's skirt. "It was a promise you were never going to be able to keep in the first place, Cordy. Hiding from Angel isn't going to make that fact go away. Now, you're just being cruel. He can't die without your permission; you took on a new Warrior right in front of his face without even consulting him first; and now you're just blowing him off."

>
"So, you think I shouldn't have taken on a new Warrior either?"

>
Harry exhaled slowly. "This isn't about you continuing as Messenger. Frankly I think your decision is brave and admirable but the timing is ALL wrong."

>
Cordelia straightened in her chair, setting the cup on her desk so she could elaborate with her hands. "No one seems to understand there is no time, Harry. I don't know why exactly, but I FEEL it. It's like all this pressure. Like life is one big sinus cavity that's pulsing and throbbing and clogged-but-not-clogged and ready to go kablooeey and no matter how much Sudafed you use, there's no relief."

>
Harry, not really sure what to make of the analogy, nodded her approval anyway. "So you understand the urgency of time in the case of demon versus demon. Great."

>
As Whistler called from the stairwell, the two women helped one another rise. "But everyone's got constraints on time, Cordelia. And I think you need to start considering Angel's."

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>
"She's the pretty prize, isn't she? She sees me. She KNOWS. The soul? The device of my delusion. Look at me! What benevolence is there when I have placed humanity where they want you--at the threshold of destruction."

>
Breaking Wesley's hold, Angel twirled to the center of the living area, and spread his arms wide. "BEHOLD ANGELUS! All that I have ever been! Return me to my creator's arms. ACATHALA! I ACCEPT MY DESTINY!"

>
Wesley eased with him to the floor as Angel's equilibrium gave way. Brushing perspiration into Angel's hairline, he could detect the fever's raging intensity as he held onto the reeling vampire to set him back onto his heels. "Surely, Angel, you can't believe what you're saying. You are not without some good. Look at Cordelia's devotion. My respect. And Buffy, Angel. Her love for you came with all her heart."

>
The brown eyes softened as Angel's brow creased with grave concern. Falling forward, he rested his forehead against Wesley's.

When the ex-Watcher's glasses fogged slightly, he used his index finger to smear the film away. "Have I even blinded you soooooo much?" he whispered.

>
"I... I don't understand, Angel. Where any of this is coming from. Blinded me to what?"

>
"Buffy was a CHILD." He simpered, "I corrupted a child." Staring at the make-shift bandage, silent words poured from Angel's lips. Then, flinching, he whispered, "Cordelia?"

>
"Yes, Angel. We're getting Cordelia." Wesley smoothed Angel's cheeks for reassurance, unsure of how to react while Angel wept before returning, indifferently, to his original line of thought.

>
"You see, little man, I thought I was trying to become someone all this time. Trying to find redemption, humanity. But they told me I never had it to begin with and I just didn't understand what they meant. I'm so wick-ed. NEVER been human. But I'm such a good poser. They made me pleasant to look at and the soul-- They gave me everything I needed to betray you all."

>
Angel pawed Wesley's face and pulled it closer to his, searching the ex-Watcher's eyes, wanting to possess that unattainable concept he saw within their brilliance. "Fooled you all." His confession was tinged with disappointment. "And you let me get away with it, too. All of you. All of it."

>
Wesley was unable to sever Angel's hold or unrelenting study. "Angel, why are you saying these things?"

>
"Because. It doesn't matter. I'm finally accepting it. What I've been all along. I'm letting go of the dream now." Rubbing his nose on Wesley's before returning his forehead to rest against younger male's, Angel explained, "the irony is that I almost didn't notice you all have to die to feed me--to fuel my next immortality. For when I return. Boy, am I gonna be hungry..."

>
His hands bore heavily on Wesley's shoulders. "So, whaddya YOU think? Do you think they'll be pleased with silly, ignorant me? All this time and I've been looking in all the wrong places for approval."

>
"Angel," Wesley whispered, overcome by grief, "THIS is the dream. Not that you've been on a proper journey helping mankind. The Powers That Be aren't the bad guys, Angel. We may not know who they are, but they're not the bad guys."

>
"They're not?" Angel strained to believe the words, finding it nearly impossible. This human felt so nice against him, so open. And he remembered how much he loathed being so all by himself.

>
"Angel." Amazed he had any strength left to resist Angel's luring desolation, Wesley slowly lifted away, studying the residue on his fingertips. "You're not a bad guy either. You're not entirely evil and certainly not the corrupter you believe you are. God knows that, too."

>
As the elevator clicked into motion, Wesley breathed in relief. He watched Angel's countenance relax, the tortured features smooth as marble filled those haunted eyes, and an innocent smile creep into place. Then, without warning, Wesley accepted complete failure.

>
"God," Angel stated flatly. "What God."

>
The hug Cordelia returned whole-heartedly was so strong Harry almost fainted. It was as if, by squeezing hard enough, Cordelia could protect herself from the inevitable. But reality set in as her enthusiasm waned and Harry empathized from experience with the burden of finally attending to an overly-postponed decision.

>
Pushing Cordelia's hair away from her pretty face, Harry rocked

her gently, willing to allow a stay of decision for a little while longer while Cordelia gathered all the strength she could find; most certainly not all she would need.

>When the elevator finally arrived, the embrace dissolved and Harry smiled at the person who had entered her arms so childlike now moving on to fulfill her adult obligation.

>It was surreal--the excursion down with Cordelia peering out through the iron cage to survey her adopted home. Even the drone of the lift's mechanism seemed quieter than usual. She waggled her fingertips at Wesley when he turned, appreciably looking up from where he was situated on the floor with Angel. When Whistler reached for her hand before he released the gate, she returned the hand-held hug to reassure him.

>Relinquishing his position, Wesley assisted Cordelia into place. Angel had never taken his eyes from her, not from the first moment she stepped into view. Ever the intruder, Wesley averted his attention from the silent apologies--Cordelia for taking so long to appear; Angel for being unable to help her keep her word. And, as always, Wesley fought to ignore that ever-present affection.

>Angel reached for her. Nothing else mattered as long as Cordelia was alive, safe, healthy and happy--preferably always in that order.

"Please. Let me go," he pleaded into her hair, nuzzling its silken texture and tasting the perfume in her styling product. "Please... Let. Me die."

>With her cheek against his humid chest, Cordelia listened to Angel sob, feeling as though she'd aged a lifetime in the past few hours. Her head still throbbed from the most recent Vision and her heart ached over the decision he needed her to make. She wanted to whine, to stomp her feet and complain about the unfairness of dumping such a burden on her 19 year-old frame. But, that wasn't an option available to her anymore and the being in her arms had a great deal to do with the reason why that was.

>She rose steadily and offered her hands to him. "Angel." She spoke affirmatively, "I'm not going to let you die..."

>He gazed up into her face, captivated by her inner glow and unrelenting persistence about keeping one little promise. He thought, for a moment, to argue with her even though he knew there was no fight to win unless she allowed him victory. Helpless, he bowed his head against her regard and let someone's voice express an opinion. It wasn't until she had repeated herself for the seventh or eighth time he finally understood what Cordelia was saying.

>"I'm not going to let you die... Alone."

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>They lay on his bed, he enveloped by her slender arms with his head just below hers, listening to her heart whisper in his ear. As she fell into the rhythm of her pattern of speech, Angel monitored her life. And then, if for no other reason than to truly share the one she was revealing, he began to breathe along.

>He tried to pay attention--real attention--and capture her every word. Of classes at the barre, her first recital in toe shoes and how Daddy missed it because he was in 'Mini Soda' on business. Of her first pony that constantly threw her away until it was replaced. Of parties where perfect smiles were graced to those who brought anonymous gifts; presents always nice enough despite being so impersonal.

>And of how those gifts had been used to support her those first uneasy months after graduating High School, for living in L.A. before they found one another.

>"You should pay attention to this one. I LOVE this story," he

whispered, his accent almost too heavy to be understood as his mouth widened with an enthusiastic grin.

>Angel could feel himself mirroring the sentiment. "What's this one about?"

>Doyle chuckled, shaking his head as he pulled at the corner of his eye with his index finger. "The first boy she ever kissed. Poor bastard." He winced and looked around before leaning in to finish, "I'd wager he still hasn't recovered."

>"Angel focused beyond Doyle as he concentrated. "Yeah. I think I've almost heard it once or twice. Returning to his dearly departed friend, Angel let the smile wane. "You're here to... You know... Take me..." He sighed. "There?"

>"UH! That freakin' charm bracelet story. At some point she's got to send that one packing." The disgust with the topic didn't keep Doyle from examining Cordy a little harder. "Nah, man. I've already taken all the journeys I can with you."

>Noticing Angel's disappointment, Doyle seemed to remember the meaning behind that look and went back to basics. "You'll be OK, Angel. Courage under pressure and all."

>Basics obviously didn't work like they used to. "Really. You'll be fine, Angel. It's not like you've never been through this before."

>"Yeah, my annual big event," Angel pouted. "Other beings get birthdays-- It's so different this time, though. So much has changed in a year."

>"Oh," Doyle began, pleased by the sarcasm, "like moving and getting yourself established and helping the hopeless and such?" When Angel shrugged, he ventured, "or finding yourself at the end with friends and family and home?"

>"That. It's... bizarre?"

>"My sentiments exactly. Thanks, you know. For giving that all back to me."

>A silence hugged them while Doyle followed along with another familiar anecdote.

>"Don't leave," Angel pleaded, unconcerned by how needy he must have sounded.

>"Oh, I'm not gone," Doyle answered as he left Cordelia's story behind. "It's like Brainerd told you, 'your personal belongings that can't be taken until you willingly relinquish them', you know. Or something to that effect. He uses too many words. You ever notice that? Just can't seem to keep it simple." He sheepishly peered at Angel out of the corner of his eye, "anyway, there's certain things you're not going to lose as long as you hold onto them--me, Cordy, him--"

>"Wesley. He has a name," Angel chided, trying to cover the humor in his voice.

>"Wezzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzley, as you refer to him. I bet that rankled him in the beginning. Brits are such wankers about their names."

>"Ok, Doyle, enough. Are you here to help me through this or just here to bash Wesley?"

>"But, he's ENGLISH, Angel!"

>Angel shrugged, unapologetic. "What can I say? I'm obsessed with the English."

>"I still can't believe you like him. Just got over me like that!" Doyle, bummed, snapped his fingers. "And Cordy... She doesn't LIKE him, does she? I mean, that would just be too cruel. Cut me to the bone."

>"You're a ghost, Doyle. Of the boneless variety. And, besides, she and Wesley aren't like that. Just because she's kissed him once or

twice..." That comment got the desired effect, taking only a few seconds for Doyle to realize he'd been mocked.

>He laughed. "Who died and gave you a sense of humour?" Doyle squinted his blue eyes for a deeper inspection before remembering, "oh, yeah. That would be me!"

>Amused, the familiar teasing felt good and Angel closed his eyes for a moment to reflect on it. The sound of rainfall trickled in the background as a little girl happily skipped around a well, the apron over her skirt swinging in opposite motion. Her wet long brown hair, lavishly laced with strands of red ribbons, bounced deliriously as she hugged a cherished doll to her chest. Singing his name repeatedly, she reached out a hand to him...

>"C'mon, Liam, you wee mouse. The view is grand from this one. Look!" he shouted, retracting his offered hand to point the opposite direction into the distance at the approaching dark spec. "Da's surrey."

>Liam continued to shake his head vigorously as he looked into the older boy's dark brown eyes sparkling with daring. Adamantly holding onto the tree's trunk Liam complained, "too high and too far out. Come back. You might fall if you stay." Then, timidly, he unwrapped one arm from his support and held out his tiny hand, even though he knew they weren't close enough. But, still...

>"Liam!" he scolded congenially, as laughter bubbled from somewhere deep within his free-spirited core. He was always laughing, this one, as if life could be so enjoyable.

>But the joy ceased and, as he glanced back to Liam, he swallowed in fear. The simple crack became a long pitching moan as the limb continued to shear. Then the terror in his face gave way to acceptance.

>The smiling boy, his arms open wide and his upturned gaze hollow, was adrift on an emerald sea. "Children do not fly," Liam told the man who came for him, and he continued to offer his 6 year-old palm, amazed how it was suddenly large enough to cover the entire odd lay of a body...

>"Angel, close your eyes," she spoke. There was something immensely sad in the quality of the voice belonging to this strong young woman he loved. An approaching roar was dousing the sound of a sparkling fountain. When he felt it--that piercing, he disobeyed her request long enough to see the acceptance in her face as a choir of dying children screeched his name before tearing him away. He reached for her but she kept backing away...

>"You know, other than my parents, I think Xander may have been the only one who ever came to the hospital to see me," Cordelia concluded.

>"Don't say anything, Angel. Just nod or... yeah, that's alright. Hold her fingertips. That's good."

>Doyle regarded the pair tenderly as Cordy bestowed an insecure grin upon Angel to break the intensity of his attention. "You just got yourself a bonafide Cordy moment. Those don't happen very often and it's best not to trash 'em with sentimentality or such."

>As Cordelia broke into a different story, Angel tried to shake the immense sense of isolation he felt, an emotion he was sure had also been coming from Cordelia. Then he remembered they weren't connected like that anymore. In an attempt to push his growing anxiety aside, he tried to refocus on Doyle, but the apparition wasn't solid anymore.

>"Nooooooooooooo."

>"...strength of many, undo the done; for each of us a Promised One..."

>"A poem?" Angel asked, disconcerted. "At a time like this?"

>Doyle shook his head deliberately. His face was relaxed, serene. Reaching forward, his fingertips touched the center of Angel's chest as he replied, "no, Angel. Truth." But the vampire's distress increased, even after he added, "Faith, man," before shimmering away.

>Angel held onto Cordelia a little tighter and she returned the embrace without a pause to the stories she told. He silently apologized for ignoring her, knowing she would never expect him to remember half of what she said anyway because he never did (not that he didn't want to) and because she just accepted that was the way he was.

>Matching her warmth, breathing in time, sharing her heartbeat, Angel tried to understand how Cordelia, of all people, could so unconditionally accept what he was. It made him consider if he actually had managed to start becoming a 'who'--not because a person actually existed but because Cordelia had fashioned one. Or was it her acceptance that had allowed someone to surface without fear of reprisal, that being himself might have been good enough all along?

>Regret reared its ugly head. Then cowardice. That even still he was unable to open up to her. There were too many misdeeds to relate, no way to just explain one without attempting to explain them all; and, ultimately, the fear of maybe losing everything by sharing. Even though she had promised to preserve all his secrets, sometimes some promises were just too impossible to keep.

>Gravity shifted, the earth discreetly turned. Words became seconds; sentences minutes. Even Cordelia's affection could not harness time. Angel wanted to believe he could retain some aspect of this when he traversed the dimension, even if, instead of providing comfort, it increased the anguish of his impending next eternity. His eyes were closed to thought when he finally detected it--

>Dawn's arrival.

>Somehow Cordelia sensed it too because she swept back his hair and pressed her lips across his brow before hugging him like she would never see him again. And then it seemed as though she expressed something with words, but not words, even though that couldn't have possibly been the case.

>He waited. One moment. Then another. Listening to her ragged breath as he waited for a signal. Then with fateful acceptance, he knew there was no other choice and he stoically rose to meet his climax.

>He saw them without seeing. Whistler--lost to emotion he still fought to control, Harry--her inner serenity enviable and almost mocking. And Wesley--the original open book, plagued by allergies and probably silently praying. They accompanied him to the door and waited for their final farewells.

>With Cordelia never releasing his hand.

>It was the oddest of sensations, to be so connected to these others. To be bundled with their affection for his last task as if, by adding an extra embrace, he would be insulated against his morbid outcome; that it would be less painful, or less sad. The raw, emotional contact left him searching them for understanding of why--for the first time in, like, seriously forever--he wasn't hiding, or fighting. Or biting.

>Barely detectable at first, it came. Just like that. In less than the blink of an eye. Hope. That he was going to be able to do this on his own. Taking deep breaths for resolve, he acknowledged his final mandate.

>And accepted it.

>He studied her perfect face and the brightness of those hazel eyes. Somehow, by her conviction, she had willed him Company. That he should not take this final journey alone, defeated. His mind--silent, his soul--calm, the demon--restrained. And within the stillness he found it also there, just waiting for his simple recognition.

>That she had willed him Peace.

>He imagined a knock on his door. Like so many train excursions and a friendly Porter to pass the morning paper or ready his bunk, Angel awaited his guide. He was already at the destination and only needed to exit. And, so it began with that not-so-tentative first step forward...

>Wesley, unsure of what he had heard, glanced at Cordelia briefly before he slid open the side door.

>The Courier, off-guard, stared at the group facing him as he delivered the parcel from the LAPD homicide unit's Detective Kate Lockley. He hadn't expected so many people to greet him at such an early hour. While waiting for the signature of a young woman who didn't look much older than his own daughter, he studied the fellow named Angel. He had never seen a more tranquil--or confused--look on anyone's face in his life.

>Making him wonder if it was a mirror of his own expression when the euphoric group hug nearly smothered him.

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>After hunkering into the chair, Angel drew his fingers through his hair as if the motion would somehow put the pieces to his visual puzzle together. His concentration was shot. He picked up a folder, flipping through it for the umpteenth time in less than four hours but nothing--absolutely nothing--about the case made any sense as raging hunger vied for his attention.

>Humiliation also nagged at him; but hunger was much more intrusive.

>Somehow, his intuition managed to interrupt. He knew he was connected to the 19 men whose lifeless, peaceful faces lay spread before him in black and white clarity. He also knew he shouldn't have needed Kate Lockley's suspicious and ever-becoming fanatical opinion to alert him to that fact. The Los Angeles Times banner since December had been speaking to him personally.

>He had just been a little too preoccupied to listen.

>"I can't come up with a connection either, Angel," Wesley remarked as he returned from downstairs. "I think THIS one might actually be better than the one I made this morning. I still can't believe my oversight regarding your mutation and I hope you can forgive me for letting you suffer for so long. How difficult would it have been these past few months to monitor your blood?"

>Wesley hesitantly reached out but, when the vampire curled more tightly into his almost-embryonic position, he merely set the container on the edge of the desk and withdrew to the opposite side. The tips of Angel's disheveled hair shivered as his arms wound more tightly around his neck until barely one eye peered through the vee of his elbow.

>After Kate's reprieve, Wesley tested Angel and planned a few simple twists for his diet--the easiest one being to 'nuke the hell out of his feed' as Cordelia put it. An earlier examination would have greatly eased Angel's discomfort but Wesley, fearing Angel's mistrust after threatening to stake him, hadn't wanted to suggest it. As it was, even with one digestible meal, the lip sealed and the thumb was drying.

>It was difficult for Wesley to sit in the silent room, pretending as if nothing had happened. Angel had, though his outburst, completely

dismantled the superficial wall between them and now expected Wesley to just disregard the things that had been said or witnessed. Feeling the overwhelming need for discussion, Wesley left his words unspoken as Angel, dark pools of exhaustion beneath his eyes making his brow seem that much more pronounced, shifted slightly.

>"It's ritual," Angel said finally, "but I can't figure out what kind. It doesn't look evil. Human or demon. Maybe. Does it look evil to you?"

>Wesley bobbed in agreement as he leafed through another folder. Holding death in his hand, sitting in its company, he cringed. In its simplest form, death marked the passage of time and Wesley found he wanted to hold all of them still. He had been so willing to surrender Angel and now, with the temporary reprieve, he wasn't sure he was going to be able to do that at all.

>"Angel, sit up straight!" Cordy commanded as she breezed into the office and tweaked the blind open a scintilla more. "Hey, Wesley, did you put Tabasco in this like I told you to?"

>"No. Your comment about it being good enough for aliens wasn't good enough for me. Angel didn't have a problem with the way it tasted earlier," he added, peering over the top of his file in time to watch Angel's posture loosen a smidgen.

>"It's OK--" Sighing, Angel pushed another photograph aside as Cordelia whisked the cup downstairs.

>"I will mention one thing, though, I think the description of a 'medium-tall, medium-build, dark-haired figure may very well apply to a female." Wesley felt a twinge of optimism when Angel leaned forward.

>His index finger rubbed his chin as Angel stacked papers, one on top of each other, attempting to read them. "Kate's an expert profiler and the FBI experts all say 'male'. Why would you think the opposite?"

>Wesley exercised a dimple. "It's just that there's no real 'crime' here. I'm no profiler, but even I can see that any of these men could have very well died of natural causes. There's nothing that would indicate the killer was trying to show superiority--either physical or mental. ...all supposedly heterosexual... ...nothing about sexuality playing a role in any of the deaths anyway... And, from the looks on their faces, the deceased weren't necessarily frightened."

>Angel sifted through another autopsy report uneasily. "Nothing. No sexual activity of any kind. No abuse..."

>"Although," Wesley pointed to a slight dark spot on one of the victim's upper torsos, "he looks as if he's been necking."

>"Who's been necking?" Cordelia examined the layout briefly after returning Angel's lunch. Looking into the front office as Mahoe growled at Whistler who had, obviously, just won another round of dominoes she distractedly added, "love bites are so old school. Who does that anymore?"

>She tch'd her disapproval before walking away.

>"You know, Angel," Wesley lowered his voice after Cordelia exited, "these murders started in December at the approximate time of Doyle's unfortunate demise... And, not one murder occurred over the past eight weeks..."

>"Shut up, Wesley." Angel reshuffled the photographs on his desk, relaying them according to locations of the dark spots each of them seem to have.

>"Angel... From your reaction, it's obviously crossed your mind. Look at it. You don't really know how the Gift has affected her all these months. Not to mention everything she's gone through in the past

year. Losing her affluence, that graduation... And she's killed more than a few demons. I personally watched her carefreely hack one to pieces, Angel. What if she's crossed that line?"

>"She's not like that." Angel glared at Wesley unmercifully but when the ex-Watcher didn't retreat as usual, Angel did instead. He bore his cheek into the back of his hand as he rested one arm onto the other. "I told you I destroy."

>"Some demons are such whiners!" Cordy complained as she tended to the blinds again. "Whistler's, like, getting all hissy 'cause Mahoe won't make the tiles kiss."

>She picked up, then dropped a photo. "Ooooooh! He was a hottie! So, Angel, you gonna crawl under the desk? Cause if you are, I should sweep first. Guy, I wish Dennis was mobile. He would keep this place like so, totally, spotlighted. You should try to find some spell for him, you know. He must really get bored hanging-- or whatever ghosts do. Do they hang? Hmmmmmm. More floaty, huh? And, leave these blinds alone! It's not like you wanna make Wesley's more blind. OK?"

>Wesley looked across the desk at Angel after Cordelia left to answer the phone. "Poor deluded girl. She has no recollection at all of her crimes, Angel. I'm sure Kate would be completely understanding and help her get leniency on an insanity plea--"

>"You won't believe me. I'm not going to believe you," Angel commented under his breath.

>"Angel!" Wesley whispered harshly. "You can't pretend she's alright. And now with your illness..."

>"CORDELIA!"

>The brunette dropped her magazine and sauntered back into Angel's office. "Whatcha need? Hey, so Angel, how old are all these guys..."

>"Did you kill them?"

>Speechless, but just for a moment, Cordelia turned and popped Wesley across his shoulder. "Now you're accusing me of murder?"

>"HEY!" Wesley massaged his arm, confused. "Angel is the one who asked you. Not me."

>"Yeah, well Angel doesn't think things like that. Or, maybe he does but he doesn't say them. Why would you accuse ME? He looks tall, and him, too. So, how tall are all these guys?"

>Wesley ignored Angel's 'so there' face, still unconvinced of Cordelia's innocence when he turned to follow the sound of ivory blocks scattering into the office.

>"I HATE this friggin' schma-hoe," Whistler mumbled as he retrieved the game pieces. "So, what's this case all about?" he asked, nonchalantly edging towards the evidence.

>"What, you guys?" Angel asked, wary of Whistler's scrutiny.

>"He don't see it. How about either of you?"

>Cordelia nodded as she flipped through a clamped packet. "Yeah, but it's hard to tell because their eyes are all closed. Of course, Mr. Self-Concealed, here, wouldn't catch it. Poisoned. Check it out! They're all even caffienators."

>"And they could all be your brothers, Angel," Wesley replied as he lifted a bottom folder. "Despite their ethnic backgrounds, they share enough of a resemblance with you..." He flipped more quickly. "...small sooty heart on his chest... ..found in an open field facing east... The hickey must signify, what? And now that we know the connection that Kate probably wanted you to confirm, where do we look for the killer?"

>Walking around the desk, Angel studied the deceased from the trio's

perspective. Those countenances did seem so familiar...

>As Cordelia dropped into a Vision, he blocked out the office activity to turn the nineteen face-down. Someone obviously wanted his attention; and that someone obviously wanted him dead. It just didn't seem proper the innocent always got that way ahead of him.

>-0-

>Cordelia glanced behind her back, looking out into the parking lot through the front window as Wesley leaned around towards the back until he pitched forward across the table abruptly. Still distracted, he smiled 'thanks' at the hand that helped rescue his cafe mocha.

>"The Coffee Spot, right? When did he say to meet him? He should have come with us, Wesley. And he would have never let you wear those ridiculous contacts." She continued shaking her head when an impeccably dressed young man smiled at her as he returned to his chair after reciting his poem.

>Wesley glanced at his watch, trying not to look as worried as he felt. "He wanted to confer with Kate, that's all. Look, here he comes!"

>Angel approached the table unsteadily, less affected by his health than the numbing dÃ©jÃ vu. As Wesley left to take the open microphone, he cast a quick once-over. "What does he think he's doing?" Angel asked Cordelia. "That's my coat, isn't it?"

>"It's a little big through the shoulders, but he looks good in black leather. Ew. What's with his accent? Oh, man. That SUCKS! Who told him he could do accents?"

>"Irish," Angel explained softly, listening to Wesley's recitation of a Wordsworth poem. Flattered, he smiled. "Way wrong poet, though. But the accent's not half-bad. Irish is hard to do well."

>Cordelia wasn't convinced and she rolled her eyes at Wesley when he returned to the table. "You are so WEIRD!"

>Before he had a chance to make a comment of his own, however, Angel gripped the side of the high table and lowered his head slowly onto his arm. With Cordelia gripping his hand, he struggled through an explosion of internal pain. He neither had the ability nor heart to explain what a terrible idea the Tabasco had been.

>"Angel," he heard her say softly some moments later after the episode passed. "Let's go. I think Wesley went to get the car."

>But, after he lifted his head and looked out the window to notice his auto still in its space, Angel instantly knew that wasn't the case. It only took Cordelia a moment later to confirm his suspicion when she regripped his hand before leaning across the table to make it through a spasm of her own.

>-0-

>Wesley moaned before he became fully cognizant. His throat was parched and, when he swallowed, he acknowledged a taste in his mouth he didn't relish at all. That, and an extra tongue.

>"Uh!"

>She lifted her face only inches from his and studied him adoringly. "Somehow I'd imagined that you were going to be, I dunno-- I guess just different."

>By the predawn light, Wesley strained to make out the features of the young woman straddling him. When she moved in to kiss him again, he jerked his head aside, verbalizing his disgust. He wanted to push her off but found the way she had tied him onto her car's hood left him little freedom to do much at all.

>"I'm not who you think I am," he explained, attempting to project

his voice louder than his fear.

>She hopped off to the pavement of the parking area where she began pacing. Her movements were sinewy, graceful. Inhuman. "We'll see about that in a few minutes," she seemed to snarl at the beckoning sunrise before twisting back to face him.

>"Well, Angelus. So close to the end, and how does it feel? I was pretty sure you'd get dead before I had a chance to do you." After squiggling her finger across his clavicle, she unfastened his shirt's top button with intense attention to detail. "If you had come to a little sooner, I REALLY wanted to do you, too."

>"Who ARE you?" Wesley asked, his investigative nature taking control of the moment until the sun suddenly broke, blinding him to all.

>He heard her scream with such ferocity it almost drowned out the sound of the approaching helicopter. He wanted to open his eyes to see what was going on, but the blow she rendered detached his consciousness. In that split-second before his awareness gave way, he was grateful for either being rescued or dead.

>Either was preferable to torture.

>-0-

>"YOU HAD NO RIGHT!" Whistler shouted at the top of his lungs to an unaffected Angel. "The Message wasn't for you in the first place and you had NO right to pass it to the humans!"

>"I had every right, Whistler."

>Outraged, he shoved at Angel in frustration, not sorry in the least when the vampire actually floundered back into his chair. "If you were going to be alive long enough, you'd learn," he seethed. "This is PTB business, Angel. Not for human consumption. This is one piece that may have helped our side and you took it away from us. How could you?"

>"It was my fault."

>Cordelia adjusted her position on the corner of Angel's desk and looked Whistler directly in the eye before accepting responsibility again. "Besides, Whistler, what did you expect us to do? Wesley's one of us. I didn't want to risk Mahoe not being able to rescue him."

>Mahoe glared at the young woman as he swept past her. Then he looked at the vampire. Contempt colored his words, "I'M the Warrior, not you. This was MY big break. But you robbed me. You'll pay."

>Whistler pimp-slapped the Warrior before shoving at him, too. "Watch the threats, Mahoe!"

>Wesley allowed Cordelia an examination of his eye, its original color more vibrant with the bruising, before resetting the ice bag. "What the hell is she?" he asked, still trying to get the acrid taste out of his mouth. "She's NOT human, Angel. At least not ALL human. That much I can say."

>Whistler stepped back when the front door opened. "We don't know what she is, Wesley. And, unfortunately thanks to Marshall Angel and Miss Cordy, we'll never be able to find out."

>The body sailed into the office and landed with a thump.

>"Special delivery!" The delivery guy stood at the entrance to Angel's office and surveyed it with haughty amusement. "Oh, so there you are," he said to Wesley. "The Immigration and Naturalization Service wanted me to drop off this package. Ta da!" he smugly sang while smacking his hands together. "It's not as fresh as it used to be, but I think the message is still meaningful."

>Angel, confused, briefly glanced at Mahoe before rising and rushing the intruder. The deliverer disabled Angel's advance after he swooned

from the aroma of the decaying body; lifting him high before being slamming him onto the surface of his desk. On his back, Angel lay still--in shock--while the being that clutched his throat morphed into a vampire.

>A being who's pulse he could feel throbbing against his own inert veins.

>"Surprise, surprise," it whispered before releasing him and fleeing with supernatural speed through the front door.

>Angel couldn't get up, immobilized by too many thoughts. Wesley had been threatened. The delectable body of his former snitch, LÃfo, was on his office floor, a familiar pendant used to garrote him. And, what looked like a vampire had just run into a sunny midday street, according to Cordelia, to get into a shiny black limousine.

>Oh, yeah. And Mahoe just stood there, watching.

>-0-

>She used her thumbnail to flick at the other nails on her hand while trying to control her rage. It wasn't helping though, so she threw her coffee cup across the room instead. When he managed to avoid being hit, that made her even angrier.

>"Look, Kate--"

>"I DON'T WANT TO HEAR YOUR FUCKING EXCUSES, ANGEL!" She growled, trying to control her blood pressure. "I sent you the case only for demonic confirmation in the first place. I wasn't asking you to solve it. THAT was MY job. I should have never gotten you involved."

>It didn't matter how many ways he tried to explain Wesley's predicament to her, only one fact stood out: Wesley wasn't going to testify because Angel wasn't going to let him.

>"I don't care if he's illegal, Angel. Rosa Lopez was probably illegal and SHE still testified. Hundreds of illegales testify, no matter what their countries of origins. Hell, he's even from England. I'm pretty sure America is still on good enough terms with the Queen he won't be unfairly deported."

>"That depends on your definition of 'deportation'."

>"I'm screwed and you don't care. That's what this comes down to. You want to keep your little evil empire out of the sun while the rest of the world has to suffer. This bitch killed NINETEEN innocent men, Angel. Their only crimes were how much they resembled you in some way. And now there's not going to be any justice for any of them because if your boy won't testify AS THE ONLY WITNESS, I've got no grounds to keep Ms.Cynthia Minn. I've got NO incriminating evidence on her. Nothing. And less than 20 hours after 4 12 clueless months to find something to keep her ass in jail."

>
He hated when her exotic blue eyes were so avenging, but there was nothing he could do. And as he left her office, with her curses at his back, he finally began to understand the meaning behind Whistler's words. Everyone seemed to be wiser, especially Wesley who had already called The Council of Watchers against his wishes, buying them two extra hours.

>
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>
Eruwalt Augustine was watchful. He was careful.

>
The younger man in the elevator was a source of great disparagement. He had complained to Council that Wesley Wyndham-Price was far too young, his apprenticeship far too brief, to be allowed to venture such a great distance from the cloistered corps of those who where so much older and wiser. But, She had deemed him ready. And She, ultimately, was the one to renounce him.

>
She had been wrong only once in all the years Augustine served with her and he was standing next to that error in judgement,

descending into an unknown realm in industrial Los Angeles. He harbored unforgiving contempt for a man who could lose control of not one, but two Slayers--the True One to the being that Augustine was finally going to meet.

>
"Alright, then. We are here."

>
Wesley tried to sound more chipper than he felt. He was nervous as hell; perspiration had already drenched his collar. He knew the old man despised him, had never been his champion. No matter what else he did in the Elder's presence, he had to be strong--to prove how The Council's dismissal had not broken him.

>
Augustine stepped out of the carriage and took in his surroundings. While he approved of the decor, his personal principles would not approve of living in such a squalid section of town. The apartment was spacious, with few obstacles, few blind spots. Two staircases--one left, one right, and over there much to his relief, a side door to keep near his back should he need to make a hasty exit.

>
Wesley led him forward, towards a kitchen area and that's where they stood, waiting.

>
Augustine was a patient person and considered it his greatest virtue. He continued to examine the room, accounting for every weapon--or possible weapon. Listening intently, he blocked out Wyndham-Price's rapid, shallow breathing. Then, as if the air itself announced him, he felt the presence of the vampire, Angelus.

>
This not-even ancient being, Augustine thought to himself, should not be so contemporary. The clothes he wore, the style of his hair, his bearing, were far too human. Augustine heard himself inhale in surprise, his gasp from shock that this young man who approached him seemed nothing more than that--a young man.

>
Angel approached Wesley and The Council member warily. He was still concerned it was a mistake to involve The Council of Watchers since their viewpoint could never be speculated upon with any degree of certainty. Angel stopped within a few paces of the old man, not out of fear that the visitor would try to harm him, but out of courtesy for personal space.

>
"I'm Angel."

>
Augustine's curiosity increased. "Augustine. We still refer to you as Angelus, so do not find me insulting if I fail to use the diminutive."

>
Angel bowed his head in agreement. Formalities concluded, he finally turned his sight to Wesley. "Wesley. Wesley. WES!"

>
Augustine looked up in amusement at the youngest fellow. "Wyndham-Price!" He finally elbowed his ribs to catch his attention, causing the beleaguered man to take a much-needed breath.

>
After leering, Augustine stepped away from Wesley towards Angel. He could detect the underlying intelligence within the being; his polite manner was far too natural to be anything except second nature. But, not for a moment, did he doubt Angel was anything other than demon. Despite the prominent characteristics of the necromongracy, there were still many signs to define him a vampire to someone as experienced as Augustine.

>
"Getting right to it," Augustine began with his fine Continental accent, almost too youthful for his apparent age, "I doubt The Council will be of much help in the matter of the ritual murders here in this city. Our operative base throughout the United States has diminished greatly. As you might have guessed."

>
Augustine listened as the vampire, leaning back on the sofa's

edge with his arms casually folded, explained the circumstances regarding their dilemma. He found himself not so much listening to the words but to how they were being spoken. There was a great amount of passion in the tone and, what he found difficult to believe, concern. The vampire CARED.

>
"Angel! Angel! I just heard it on the radio!" Cordelia was already out of breath as she bounded down the stairs. She shoved the nearly-mangled take-out food containers into Wesley's hands, ignoring both him and the visitor.

>
"Cordelia Chase, we have a guest," Angel, amused, motioned with his head towards Augustine.

>
The excited young woman arched back to smile at the old man. "Wesley! You're spilling!" She rolled her eyes before returning to Angel. "Unless the 'unidentified surviving victim'" she flicked her wrist back at Wesley, "testifies, the D.A. is going to have to toss the case and our unidentified otherworldly is going to be free and clear!"

>
As Cordelia droned on, Augustine studied the three, increasingly intrigued by what he saw. The vampire bestowed that same concern, albeit stronger, upon the vivacious young lady and Wesley, who had managed to gain his composure enough to take his place within the conversation. And, as Wyndham-Price joined his new colleagues, Augustine finally SAW.

>
He was awestruck by their exquisite dark beauty. The trio, like precious gemstone, glittered in the soft, muted light of the cavernous lair. Their overwhelming affection for one another was unmistakable as the two humans regarded their much-older companion not as a demon, but friend.

>
With the potential for Prophecy before him, Augustine was paralyzed by the thought that, perhaps, the endless cycle was drawing to a close. There was a melancholy accompanying the assumption the universe had grown bored and was finally willing to put demon- and humankind out of their misery. It caused Augustine to ponder whether or not to finalize his personal tasks--to bring Wyndham-Price back to England and do away with the vampire for once and for all, perhaps making it possible to bring The Slayer back, as well, before the Next War.

>
Angel reached forward and impeded Cordelia's fall, gratefully accepting Wesley's help as they eased her onto the sofa. Concerned, he watched her convulsion, impatient for Wesley to return with a glass of water and aspirin. It wasn't until after Cordelia finished her medicine he--or any of them--remembered someone else was in the room.

>
His approach ceased when Angel stepped in his way. Their visual confrontation was unlike any he had ever experienced but it was still so easy to swiftly reach into his jacket and extract the stake. When the vampire slightly recoiled, however, Augustine halted the forward motion of his hand.

>
"You're afraid to die," he spoke, absolutely astounded. "On the precipice of death and you can't let go. Amazing. And I'm sure, in the shape you're in, you've been wishing someone would have done this to you weeks ago."

>
There was a slight, ever-so-slight, look of shame that shadowed Angel's features before he inclined his face. When he straightened it again, his gaze was strong as he calmly unfastened the buttons of his shirt and repositioned the stake exactly above where it belonged. "I had wanted to see this case through, but maybe this way is best... Wes, you should take Cordelia upstairs."

>
Angel was hardly resigned with the situation, but Augustine could see the exhaustion. The creature was cruelly

positioned--miserable to be needed while needing to be put out of his misery. Cordelia crying in the background was barely audible over the beating of his own heart as he continued to hold the vampire's gaze. Somewhere, in the depths of those anxious brown eyes, he thought he located something...

>
Until Wyndam-Price stood in his way.

>
"This is not a dream, young man."

>
Angel reached around and took the stake from Augustine's hand, apathetically tossing it towards the kitchen before rebuttoning his shirt. "He's right," he sighed as he clapped Wesley on the shoulder before returning to Cordelia's side to ease her fear.

>
It was the first time Augustine had ever seen Wyndham-Price as a man instead of the timid boy who could do nothing right in the eyes of his father. At the edges of those clear grey eyes he could still see that insecurity, but also more--so much more--of what he'd caught a glimpse of in the vampire. And he relaxed with enjoyment, thrilled beyond his wildest imagination that the undefeatable spark in a child had not submitted to complete annihilation, but had managed to survive, broken yet salvageable.

>
The boy had finally found some place to belong and it had taken a vampire's acceptance to restore the survival instincts of a human spirit.

>
"Get off of me, you geezer!" Cordelia protested when Augustine began to massage her head. Within a moment, though, the complaints were forgotten. Cordelia seemed to melt from the perfectly applied accupressure. "Ooooooh, Angel," she purred, "can we trade in Wesley for him?"

>
"I don't get you," Angel stated plainly. "One second you were probably ready to haul Wesley out here, then you were ready to stake me, and now you're making Cordelia feel a little too good. Hey!" He frowned, unsure why Cordelia feeling better was supposed to be a bad thing.

>
"That was the weirdest Vision ever! No warning, no nothing. And, it's not for Mahoe. I think it's for you?"

>
After giving Wesley a moment to briefly explain her Visions to the masseuse, Cordelia explained, "an envelope. A beigey envelope about yea big," she illustrated with her hands in the air, "with either a black or dark green border and one of those red buttons with a ropey tie around it on the back."

>
Angel blinked a couple times, completely confused. "Do we use that kind?"

>
"Pffffff! Are you smoking crack, Angel? Those kinds of envelopes cost! And we don't have that kind of clientele. You guys get THOSE kinds of paying customers in here and I'll buy any kind of fancy stationery you want."

>
"Cordelia, we're not in business any more," Wesley reminded her softly.

>
"What happened here, Miss Chase?" Augustine asked as he massaged behind her ear. "That's quite a scar!"

>
"SEE! I KNEW it! Those stupid doctors kept trying to tell me there was nothing there." She reached up and gave the area a quick rub. "It's from when I fell when I almost died."

>
"You almost died?" Wesley asked, abhorred.

>
She ignored Angel's glare. "Well, I COULD have died. Long story short I got stabbed in the back by love. At least Angel saw his coming. Mine came from outta nowhere. And I didn't even deserve it!"

>
"Anyway, anything else about this envelope?" Angel asked, trying to divert the subject while absently pinching one of his shirt's buttons.

>
"Your hand, please, Angel." Augustine held out his own for receipt of his request and Angel, surprisingly, granted it. He studied the lines there on the palm voraciously, as if he'd never seen anything more interesting and then he looked into Wyndham-Price's face.

>
Angel couldn't get his hand back. The man who held it was incredibly strong and panic began to set in when he realized he had not only allowed himself to be set up, he may have placed Cordelia in jeopardy. He furiously tugged, but Augustine wouldn't release him.

>
The old man just kept staring at Wesley.

>
"MY call, eh, Wyndham-Price? Interesting that the tables have turned. What do you think I should do?" He heard the girl begin to whimper softly, perhaps some sort of empathic connection to the vampire's sudden panic. But, Augustine held on fast as Wyndham-Price continued to meet his gaze honestly and without reserve. After banishing every thought and emotion within his body, Augustine allowed Prophecy to make the decision...

>
It took a second after Augustine tightened the grip on his hand for Angel to recognize the pain. Their eyes were locked in silent communication for just long enough to have Angel's free-will ripped from his being along with every thought and emotion.

>
"RA THRASHA HO'ASH THRASHA MA CHA'MAE!"

>
Meaningless words tumbled through Angel's mind as a torment seared inwards, cutting a path through the layers of skin, through muscle, to bore into his skeleton. It was as if all the marrow within every bone ignited at once, engulfing Angel in a brilliant white heat, an agony he had never endured before in his life. Whatever this was, he vaguely knew its outcome would not include a heartbeat for a mere mortal man would have died seconds into the experience.

>
He frantically sucked at the atmosphere, trying to endure the experience without losing consciousness. Instinct, and only instinct, remained to warn him of danger for Cordelia. Through the misty vision of his disintegrating reawakening he saw her being torn through the side door--stolen from his life. He could barely hear her scream his name, or see her outstretched hand. Within his mind, he called out for her but the voice remained within. Using his very last strength, he reached to her but she was gone.

>
Exhausted. Defeated. Numb.

>
Collapsed on the floor, oblivion beckoned and Angel accepted it gladly, at last willing to relinquish his dream. Bathed in silence, his lids alternated vision between darkness and light, darkness for longer increments as the more intimately known of the two. And, Angel's last recognition before fading away was the mark on the heel of his palm as if the flesh had been scored with the finest of blades.

>
He would have never suspected the very end to have been a joke so cruel.

>
-0-

>
"ARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRGH!!!"

>
Every item on the table scattered in a different direction as it was swept from her view. Afterwards, she set the table on end.

>
"I don't know, Mr. Mercer. What do you make of that?" The emotion emanating from the exquisite Latin intonation was difficult to gauge.

>
Lee Mercer, attorney at law from the offices of Wolfram & Hart narrowed his disdainful gaze. The client wasn't the only one displeased with The Consultant's outburst. She had yet to prove her

monetary worth. Still, he mused as he let his eyes wander up and down her willowy frame, all her talents had yet to be fully been explored.

>
She turned to her audience and pursed her lips, regaining some composure by smoothing her dark tresses. "Twenty readings and all the same message. He's dead. FINALLY!" she pronounced in her shrill Cockney accent.

>
Andres Cort-PinzÃ³n was still unconvinced. "If the cards repeat the message another twenty times, I MAY be willing to accept your statement as fact, Dru. For right now, though, I'm more inclined to believe that a certain someone is taking her frustration out at billable hours. Perhaps that certain someone would like to return to work?"

>
Araceli Duarte stifled a snicker as she eyed Mercer's discomfort. "And while she returns to her study, Sir--" Her own accent was less prominent, tainted by a North American college education. She tapped the face of her watch, and as her superior nodded in gratitude, Duarte extended an ushering wave of her hand as a courtesy.

>
Dru tore across the room, her red-painted nails poised for attack, as the smug Spaniards turned their backs but Mercer caught her waist to spin her around, surprised by her hot-blooded temperament. Holding onto her just slightly longer than was necessary, it crossed his mind the vampiress could have easily broken--or avoided--his hold. If she wanted to.

>
He smiled wickedly. "Dru, dear. It's not nice to attack the client. Remember the contract you signed?" He snapped his fingers and two aides began to straighten the mess she created. "Just go ahead and have a meal and then let's get back to work, shall we?"

>
Taking the moment, Mercer considered Dru's enthusiasm regarding certain assignments. She hoisted one of the aides against the wall before burying her face in the startled woman's neck. While the activity didn't totally disgust him, he was pleased he hadn't been standing closer.

>
Hurrying after the client and assistant, Mercer apologized. "I'm so sorry, SeÃ±or Cort-PinzÃ³n. I had no idea how difficult she was going to be to work with when I... mean... WE hired her for your benefit. Her efforts haven't been completely unproductive, though, and I hope once she verifies her findings..."

>
Cort-PinzÃ³n heaved his annoyance as he picked up the pace of their walk. "This facility, Mr. Mercer, is the culmination of decades of research. Its sister facility was destroyed in the course of less than a month's confinement by that one's supposed sire. All that research, Mr. Mercer. All those resources. Is Wolfram & Hart going to be reimbursing Fuerza at all? Or should I ask, more to the point--Are you?"

>
Mercer feigned ignorance.

>
Accustomed to Lee Mercer's ploys, Cort-PinzÃ³n smiled wily. "Yes, of course. The infamous 'conflict of interests'. They served you well, did they not, when you needed your necromonger? That little exercise backfired with a better outcome for Fuerza and 'the other client'. Well, you may inform your other client our business is completed. Holland will be receiving our letter of termination after Ms. Minn's dismissal of charges. And we will be finished with Wolfram & Hart, forever."

>
"But, SeÃ±or," Mercer stalled; stunned, his jaw went slack. "Out of respect for three decades of a very mutually beneficial relationship, I'd be more than happy to resign as counsel for Fuerza if I'm the problem..."

>
That annoying shriek echoed through the facility halls again before the table's thud, but Cort-PinzÃ³n's smile did not dim. "Actually, Mr. Mercer, I was going to suggest you speak to Klein and Gabler, our new firm, regarding a position there. It would be my honor to personally arrange for an introduction between you and the Senior Partners."

>
"Well, of course, SeÃ±or." Mercer's mood brightened considerably. "I'm flattered you would even consider arranging it."

>
The older gentleman raised his hand and drew the attention of the two guards that had been following outside of conversational range, requesting they escort Mercer to his limousine. Extending his hand, he allowed a perfunctory shake. "It will be good to have Cynthia free, Mr. Mercer. All the arrangements have been made and I expect you to personally escort her to the jet in the morning. One last gesture despite the dissolution of our working partnership... For the time being?"

>
While the guards led the lawyer away, Cort-PinzÃ³n glared at Mercer's back with undisguised contempt.

>
"I don't understand if you despise him so much, Sir," Duarte held her breath, waiting for Dru's filtered ranting to fade, "you would even lead him to believe he had a chance to continue as Counsel for Fuerza."

>
Cort-PinzÃ³n fingered the salt and pepper fringe at his temples before continuing their walk. "Araceli, I lost three of my finest hybrids at Dru's expense earlier this evening. That does not please me. Frankly, that much of the business Mercer personally conducted was unknown to his firm, never did please me. But, this clairvoyant--our 'Consultant'--is not without talent."

>
Shaking her head, still confused, Duarte's espresso-colored layers fell in and out of place. "Astral-projection is hardly a talent, sir. It's a fad and every witch-in-apprenticeship seems to be able to do it to some extent--"

>
It was the look more than the toss of his wrist that cut the woman's comment. "She has the ability to twist the mind, Araceli. To unlock those treasures deep within the subconscious. That she can see through the eyes of an animal means nothing to me. That is mischief. That the animal can understand and be understood? Now THAT is a talent."

>
"But, sir. We aren't going to be rescuing an animal. I still don't understand how her talents apply."

>
"You'll see, soon enough, Araceli. And after her work is done, like Mr. Mercer, she will be duly rewarded for all her efforts."

>
Lounging in the limousine's cabin on the way back to his office, Lee Mercer reflected on his good fortune. The Senior Partners would be far from pleased about losing Fuerza as a long-time client, but the severance would be an amicable one thanks to his expert witness tampering. And, with Cort-PinzÃ³n's personal recommendation, he would gain immediate access to the up-and-coming competition.

>
"The future's looking mighty interesting," he chuckled egotistically, plucking a tonic water from the fridge. It was unfortunate, he lamented as he touched the chill bottle to his temple, one very fair, intriguing female would be unavailable to help with the celebration.

>
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>
They were silent for the longest interval after the original broadcast reappeared from its brief interruption. A situation comedy worked its variation on a common theme, but neither person was laughing. Finally, annoyed with the racket, Harry clicked the remote

control.

>
"Maybe she'll never kill again," Harry offered as the up side to the news. "You know, once she's released, she'll be more conspicuous." She studied Whistler, empathizing with his despondency, not because a creature of diabolical origins had escaped justice but for what that creature's very existence meant in the first place. Squeezing the bridge of her nose, she attempted to disregard the foreboding doom Cordelia had tried to describe.

>
Whistler returned to the items on the table, lifting another to examine it in detail before moving onto the next. "Everything is so ordinary," he complained.

>
"Francis was an ordinary man."

>
Harriet Doyle rubbed at a familiar piece of ceramic before setting it into the simple corrugated storage box besides the other rejected articles of her ex-husband's life. The box wasn't very large. Preoccupied by the reasons why, she sighed heavily.

>
"But, there had to be some way he did it," Whistler insisted. "Some magic spell, some charm--"

>
"Did it ever occur to you the secret may have died along with him?" Obviously, by the way he put the last item into place, it had. "Face it, Whistler, if Francis gave Cordy the Gift, he must have done it for a reason. And if HE didn't give it to her..."

>
"Look. I don't care why. I don't care how. All I know is I've got to separate it from her."

>
After lifting a small book from the box, Harry began to thumb the pages. Written in Gaelic, she tried to remember the language but only the memory of learning it surfaced. That, and how patient Francis had been as her teacher. "Don't even try to take it from her, Whistler. You can't make a person's decisions for them, no matter how wrong you think they are," she listened to herself say, also remembering how many times she had repeated those same words to herself.

>
"But..." He regarded Harry with a pained expression, as if he was wearing his heart on his face. "She'll no longer be protected. Not the way she needs to be. Angel... The Powers That Be lost connection very late last night. He's gone."

>
She despised the feeling. Instantaneous loss. That numbing sensation before tears validated its meaning. And it always seemed to arrive in-between breaths, as if a simple pause served no other purpose than to unjustly remind the survivors that life was so much more than just involuntary motion.

>
Whistler buried his face in his hands. "It's not a matter of what Cordelia WANTS anymore. It's what's necessary. There are so many forces, Harry. And the Powers That Be are blind. They see some, but not all. And the evil... Oh, man. The evil is erupting from everywhere."

>
"But, there's always been evil," she gasped, her lower lip trembling. "Look at why Francis died. Cordy just wants to help, no matter how misguided her reasons may be."

>
"She's one girl with one Gift. In the end, she won't make a difference."

>
"But if she's willing to try, then let her. I've been out there, Whistler. I've seen the signs. I've seen the fanatics. And, they're not just demonic. There are some very demented humans in the mix. If you feel it's not Cordy's place to fight along side demons, that's fine. But, demons have NOTHING on man. I've been alot more frightened by vile men than most of the otherworldlies I've encountered."

>
"But you don't understand. It's HOPELESS!" He bowed his head,

stifling his deepest emotions, and spoke from his chest, "The Promised One was supposed to announce the arrival of The Warrior, Harry. And, not just The Warrior, but The War, as well."
>
Harry offered, "so what if Francis and Angel weren't 'THE ones'? Don't lose faith, Whistler. You're just overreacting and Cordelia isn't in the danger you think she is." Despite the crushing sentimentality of the occasion, she began to rediscover her tranquility. But that was only until Whistler happened to add that "The War had already begun."
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3. Default Chapter Title

AURORA by Evan Como (part three)

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>
The District Attorney shook Wesley's hand firmly, deeply appreciative. "Her lawyer wasn't pleased to hear the news, of course. But they've thrown in the towel and she's confessed to all nineteen. Thank you again, SO MUCH, Mr. Wyndham-Price."
>
"And you'll keep the testimony sealed? And his name sequestered?"
>
The D.A. glanced at Detective Lockley before nodding her agreement to the witness' chaperone. "Sealed. In fact, this is all so sudden, we may squeak by without any major media leaks," she added before excusing herself to her childrens' soccer match.
>
Kate alternately squinted at Angel and Wesley. "So, Mr. Dead, you look hellaciously better than the last time I saw you. What's up with that?" When he cut a glare at Wesley instead of answering, she let the question slide; not that she really wanted to care anyway. "So, how is it that less than 20 hours ago, Wesley Wyndham-Price, you were on the most ship-out-able list and now you're a full-fledged American citizen? You all got evil backup in the I.N.S. now, too?"
>
"Forget it, Kate." Angel flipped his bandaged hand at her as he began to walk away.
>
"You BASTARD! Don't you think you owe me an explanation? You nearly destroyed my case and now you've saved the day. Why do you keep doing that?"
>
"Doing what?" Angel asked, too aggravated to turn around after stopping.
>
"Spooking back in and out of my life. Either stay in or out. Oh, wait. I'm sorry. What was I thinking? From now on I'll be doing my own 'evil verification' because I don't want you anywhere near my life. So help me, one day you're going to be sorry you ever stepped into it."
>
After Angel avoided his offer of a consoling pat on the back, Wesley huffed and walked past. "Why do I get the feeling you're not the only one who's going to be sorry they ever stepped in it?"
>
"One of you an 'Angel'?" the bailiff asked upon approach of the uncomfortable duo.
>
Wesley snorted cynically, pointing. "He is. What do you need him for?"
>
"Hey, I don't need him," the stocky, balding man retorted. "That serial gal said she has something to say to her family."
>
Angel stared at the creature named Cynthia Minn. For all his expertise, he would swear she was human. Completely and purely human, or at least that's what he sensed.

>
She smiled, a seductive grin that set her attractive features aglow. When he leaned away from her defensively, she wondered why her charm didn't work on his associate. "Aren't you going to ask me anything?"

>
Her voice was rich, melodic. There was a slight accent he detected, but nothing unique enough to place her origins. He had no idea what to ask. His concentration was lost somewhere between her allure and his throbbing hand. "You tell me," he stated, uninterested.

>
She dramatically placed her palms over her heart and proclaimed, "I was born. I breathe. Human physiology complete with a beating heart and access to the broad daylight." When he seemed unimpressed, she frowned. "You met my real family, I believe. He dropped off a package to your offices..." That got the reaction she wanted and she smiled again.

>
"You're demon." He wanted to care, but the truth was he didn't. He wanted to start searching for Cordelia. When he motioned his intentions after stating his need to leave, the speed and strength she used when she rapidly pinned his hand to the table mesmerized him and he stayed put.

>
"You look like you have all the time in the world again, Angel." Slowly she began unwinding the gauze bandage from around his hand. Mesmerized, as well, she examined the wound in disbelief. Attempting to trace the scar with her fingertip, but couldn't bring herself to actually touch his flesh. "My."

>
"Look. You killed 19 guys that resembled me. No blood. That makes no sense. No brutality. That makes even less. You're telling me you're human. You're telling me you're vamp." Angel reclaimed his hand to reswathe. "You were born, so obviously you've been a long time coming, not something that just popped into the world overnight so at least I'm not going to be hearing I'm your daddy. Right?"

>
"I can do blood, but I choose not to. My brother loves the stuff. Can't get enough. Me? I'm still looking for the perfect carnitas taco. I killed those 19 guys all by myself, Angel. I planned it and almost got away with it. Other than picking up your friend by accident, I'm not sorry I did any of it. It felt, really, very good to do it."

>
"You know, I'm still fuzzy on the part how you confused my friend for me. He actually looks less like me than your victims. Oh, and the beating heart, the breathing, healthy skin tone..."

>
"Your signature. He reeked of you. Not just your clothing, there was something else that's hard to describe. I don't know. And then this soul of yours... What do I know? I thought maybe that makes you more alive-like. Or truth? I get off on accents. His Irish wasn't bad, but that English voice?" She squirmed in her chair. "Oh, don't tell me that you didn't realize every one of my victims had an accent of some type?"

>
Somehow it didn't surprise Angel that particular piece of information escaped his attention and he felt his temper flare.

>
"I confess I made a blatantly stupid error in judgement. In retrospect, I should have just killed him. He wouldn't have been you, but he would have been 20."

>
The way she sat there without remorse made Angel shudder. The way she casually described making Wesley 'number 20' made him uncomfortable. He tried not to think about the fact 24 hours earlier, he would have brutally attacked her for saying such a thing and now he was so angry at Wesley...

>
He sighed, wishing it was still 24 hours ago. "So, what were you trying to prove by killing me over and over again?"

>
"Nothing. It just seemed like it would be a hoot."

>
He stared at her in disbelief before he recognized the condition. She was--

>
"Soulless," she whispered as he mouthed the words. "That's right, Angel. I've got no soul."

>
She wanted to savor that precise moment when he figured it all out, knowing it would be a beautiful thing to see, but she didn't have that long to wait so she continued, "we are the perfect races, Angel. The strength of humanity, the strength of our demon aspects. Without souls we are unrestrained by natural laws. You can't detect me. You believe I'm human. If you can't read me..."

>
"The Powers That Be... A Slayer... They can't detect you either. But my Messenger..."

>
"Is a threat. She is unique, Angel. Like you--unique and threatening. And destructible." She cracked her knuckles into a stretch. "We are opposites, you and I. I possess a life you do not. You possess a soul I do not. Which one actually makes us more human or less evil?"

>
There was no reason to attempt to answer her question because nothing about the way she asked it made it answerable. The returned chill to his body seemed to drop several degrees. After he rose to the sound of the opening conference room door, Cynthia Minn smiled lasciviously at him, capturing his eyes before she rushed the door so quickly even he had difficulty anticipating the movement.

>
The bang jolted him and he turned slowly around. Glancing down, he watched Cynthia Minn release her last mortal breath. Then, studying her lawyer, Angel had never seen Lee Mercer with any expression other than a self-satisfied one--until that moment. Squeezing his eyes together, Angel reopened them slowly to test for a dream as the smell of purely human blood began to permeate the room.

>
Before Mercer could say whatever was on his mind as he wiped the side of his face with a hanky, Angel simply pushed past the man and Kate Lockley. Kate's unappreciative glare was devastating and Angel knew, even if he was to ask for a fold in time, one day would never be long enough.

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>
They stared at him, mute while they gazed at his hand. Disgusted by their reactions, Angel re-rolled the bandage, tucking the end it into place. "Alright then, if you have no idea what THIS means, then tell me where Cordelia is."

>
She blinked. He blinked. They blinked in unison. Still nothing.

>
"C'mon," Angel pleaded insolently, looking towards the ceiling to study the tips of the room's arched columns. "Aren't you going to listen to The Auguries or something? Can't you be even a little bit helpful?" When they continued to stare, he rudely snapped his fingers in front of their faces.

>
He really wanted to hit one of them, but couldn't decide which one he disliked more.

>
The female thoughtfully stepped forward and circled Angel warily. "The Auguries pronounced you dead. Are you an apparition? Have you been recast as other?"

>
"What the fuck are you talking about? Excuse my French." He raised his hands and pointed at the covered right. "I've been cured. Hello?"

>
The male tentatively reached out and poked Angel's arm. "You seem solid enough, but magic often takes form. Your presence is..."

obscured. If you are who you claim to be."

>
"You can't 'see' me," Angel mumbled under his breath. "What happened to me?"

>
"Health is what happened to you, Warrior Angel." The female stepped closer and also poked at him, before concentrating on his face. "I believe it may actually BE him," she spoke to the male.

"But, like you, your Messenger is hidden from our view."

>
"But you see her Gift. If you can find the Gift, you can find her."

>
"The Gift is a means of communication, Warrior Angel. Severed from her Warrior, we have no contact with her. Any aspect of her." The male listened to the silence for a moment as he continued to study The Warrior's hopeful face. "The Auguries are unsure what has occurred--only that you have regained your immortality. Beyond the obvious, much needs to be studied."

>
Meeting to depart, they nodded to one another. After the male turned, the female paused and allowed a sudden thought to deeply furrow her brow. "Warrior Angel," she called out before the vampire reached the portal entrance, "do not look upon this as an unfortunate circumstance. Sometimes that which appears to be stolen, may have only been taken for safekeeping."

>
When Angel stepped through the portal, Wesley shoved off the wall he was leaning against. He allowed Angel space while the furious Warrior stomped past and, as he followed several paces behind, he wondered what good the Oracles were if Angel was never going to speak to him again.

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>
"No, Miss Chase. The scar on your scalp had absolutely NOTHING to do with Angel's cure. I cured him. Just that plain and simple."

>
Gulping her iced tea, Cordelia eyed the old guy like she didn't believe him. The truth was, she really didn't. "So, AugieDoggieDaddy, then what you're saying is you just came in and went 'abracadabra'? Puh-leeze!"

>
"Ra thrasha ho'ash thrasha ma cha'mae. Not abracadabra. I never understood where that came from, silly nonsense. Although, I suppose if one were to create an incantation around it..."

>
"Hmmmmmm." Over the top of her sunglasses, Cordelia followed the sleek lines of a Daytona Spyder easing past their sidewalk table.

"And you're saying that means his disease. And all these eons everyone's been mispronouncing the catch phrase. Wow. THAT'S lame. You know, we've been sitting around for MONTHS trying to figure out something important for it to wind up being nothing."

>
Augustine's hearty laugh felt so wonderful, he gave into it longer than necessary for the situation. "Hardly 'nothing', Miss Chase. Are you so jaded that pure wizardry means absolutely nothing to you?"

>
She swung her fork as she spoke between bites of her salad, "oh, I dig magic as much as the next guy. You shoulda been there when our friend Willow restored Angel's soul? Now THAT was cool! She got all gooney and started speaking some language out the top of her head. What you did? Nah. We got gypped. You owe me big time if you think you're gonna impress."

>
"Alright. I'll owe you. Big time? You're a very tough critic." He mimed a signature in the air before returning his attention to the attractive skeptic. Afterwards, with his cheek resting in his hand, Augustine studied his ward. "So. We've done Rodeo and lunch. What would you like to do now? More shopping? Whatever will make you happy--even though you realize THINGS are only things and, while they

may aid in your general contentment, they will never truly make you happy."

>
"Look, Yoda, I'm young. When you're young, things make you happy. When you're old, growing flowers and doing crossword puzzles make you happy. Like Wesley. He's way old."

>
Wesley and his word puzzles, Augustine remembered fondly, amazing himself by remembering the young man with any fondness at all. "I'm sure Wyndham-Price won't be pleased to know he's been deemed geriatric. At any rate, what's next on our agenda?"

>
She stopped mid-bite and set the utensil into her dish while she seemed to mull over his question. "I NEVER thought I'd be the one to ever say this, but I'm SO over shopping right now. Let's blow this taco stand. Flip a couple for the tip so you cruise me back."

>
Augustine chuckled. He barely comprehended most of her vernacular, but so enjoyed the adorable way she spoke it. He signed the receipt, tucking it and the credit card into his billfold next to the other reminders of Cordelia Chase's extravagant taste.

>
"Work?" After she nodded, he replied, "oh, no, Miss Chase. I thought I explained this all to you after your abduction. I've stolen you from the vampire for your safety and now I'm just waiting around for a few more aspects of Prophecy to present themselves--or not--and then we'll be going back to England. You'll have a very nice life at Council while we determine how best to remove your Visions--"

>
He studied the young woman with even less understanding. On her face was absolute terror. "You can trust me on this. We wouldn't do anything to injure you. The Council's directive is to protect life, not harm it..." But his words did not ease her anxiety. "Surely, you don't want to keep them? What on earth would possess a pretty young woman to want to live her life surrounded by demons when she could be living a perfectly normal one?"

>
"Because Angel needs me," Cordy replied matter-of-factly, with no excuse better than the truth.

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>
"...and you didn't even try to stop him, Wesley. You just let him take Cordelia out of here like she was NOTHING. And now you can't even look me in the eye, you asshole!" Angel splashed water into the kettle before slamming it down on the stove and turning the flame to high.

>
"Name calling isn't going to get her back, Angel. And, shouldn't you be watching your language, by the way?"

>
"Fuck you." Angel pivoted and strode towards Wesley purposefully. Furious, he shoved the bandaged palm within an inch of Wesley's nose. "C'mon, Wes. It's just a minor-- What? Cut. Abrasion. Burn. How would you describe it because the Oracles didn't have a clue."

>
Wesley backswept Angel's hand and returned the Vampire's gaze without flinching. "You dare to mock a miracle, Angel?"

>
"Sorcery, Wesley. Council sorcery. If they can't kill me then they'll fuck with my mind?"

>
Offended, Wesley snorted and turned away. "After everything you've-- Personally, Angel, I don't even want to consider the metaphysical ramifications of your wound. Or it's purpose. Or how Augustine knew exactly what to do. Or WHY to even do it."

>
"So, you got a literal translation yet? Or you gonna keep me in suspense because you're so fucking superior with your ancient occult languages?"

>
"I don't have a key for it, Angel." Frustrated, Wesley massaged his temples with every finger, wishing he had a few more to help with the job. "It must be something very ancient. Phoenician? It sounded vaguely like an ancient Nile tongue but I--"

>
"SHUT UP ALREADY!" Angel took to pacing the apartment but, after a few lengths, he stopped to overturn one of his chairs. "I HATE YOU," he shouted across the room.

>
Wesley, smirking, reached under a book. "Well, at least you've got your eternity back to carry your grudge don't you?" he pronounced at Angel, striding up to the vampire's position. When Angel nearly swung at him, Wesley leaned back as a spirited 'hah' accompanied his amusement.

>
"Your vow to The Powers That Be won't let you hit me, will it?" He polished an envelope against Angel's chest before turning his back on the growling being. "You still haven't even figured out her Vision wasn't for you, Angel. It was for Augustine. Perhaps she was a trade. Her life for ours."

>
"The price was too high."

>
Wesley wouldn't allow himself to agree with Angel. Instead, he stood there and held Angel's defiance with his own before finally turning away.

>
Picking up the envelope, Angel frisbee'd it. "You need to be happy I can't kick your ass," he seethed. The sage-colored packet with its navy border and brown button tie nearly hit Wesley in the ear as it sailed past.

>
Carelessly tossing his glasses onto the kitchen countertop before returning, Wesley answered, "oh, you can kick my ass, Angel. In fact, I'm inviting you to kick my ass! And after you kill me, I'm going to haunt your soul. We'll both be immortal. And the delicious irony of the entire situation is I'll still be in your shadow."

>
"You don't want to do this," Angel warned, really hoping Wesley did.

>
"Why not, Angel?" Wesley taunted as he approached. "Why don't I want to do this. Because you're angry? REALLY angry? YOU'RE angry. And you can't blame it on the demonic aspect because, other than your immortality and the supernatural strength you'll be using, the demon has NOTHING to do with this. It's all you."

>
Angel felt intoxicated as his temper flared and he swallowed hard, trying to maintain some focus on his prey. Wesley dodged the first blow, then another before extending his lead leg to hook his ankle around Angel's. The motion Wesley used was fluid, flawless as he squatted and drove his shoulder into Angel's midsection. Angel fell, hard, to find himself with his face in the flooring as Wesley scrambled to pin him down. His anger fully unleashed, Angel cursed his predicament.

>
He really hated to wrestle.

>
The two males flailed at one another, Wesley at the obvious advantage as he used his skill to prevent Angel from taking to his feet. He didn't have the strength to actually hurt the vampire, but more than enough technique to use Angel's unfocused rage as counterbalance. The ground-level combat also prevented Angel from placing any real power behind his blows, causing the vampire--despite his renewed health--to lose his stamina along with the fight.

>
Angel tried to stand, but Wesley lurched forward and took him out again at the calves. His cheek squeegied when Wesley yanked him backwards and pinned him again. Angel twisted right, then left without any success until he swung his legs up and over to somersault away from his opponent. Before he could vault upwards, Wesley managed

to latch around his waist and smack Angel down onto his belly.

>
Extremely irate, Angel despised his disadvantage. "Stand up!" he groaned, as Wesley pulled his arms behind his back, with Wesley's bony knee grinding uncomfortably into the center of his spine.

>
"How's it feel to get your ass kicked, Angel? I'm just a puny human being and I'm kicking your ass," he sang.

>
That was the last straw. Angel hated sing-song, especially coming from an Englishman. He snarled and swiveled his chest, breaking Wesley's hold. And then as he stood, he swept Wesley off the ground in one motion to set him upright. Crimping Wesley firmly at the shoulder Angel's smirk, devious, eased into wicked. As Wesley grimaced from the exacting pain, Angel reached back and let his fist fly but it barely made contact when Wesley swerved his head away from the punch.

>
"You invited me, Wes. And now you don't wanna dance? You're just a big tease!"

>
"That's right, Angel. I'm a tease. Well, I'm tired of teasing. Did it ever cross your mind I may have been working for Council all these months while I've been with you? What if my role was to see if the PTB really had found a way to infiltrate humanity? What if? What if I planted the necromonger and all of this was an elaborate set up. And what if, in the end, I was the one who got SC-REWED because my assignment didn't end when Augustine came in here and rescued your wretched existence from oblivion?"

>
Angel's grasp loosened; he began to exercise the fingers of his free hand.

>
"That look on your face. What's that, Angel?" Wesley continued, leaning in to mock-study his adversary. "Trying to reject my theory? See, it's all in the pitch. You don't know if I'm lying or not because it all sounds perfectly plausible. You--the master puppeteer as puppet? Where's that rage, now?"

>
Angel smacked Wesley across the side of the head, spilling him onto the floor. "Why didn't he let me die? Why didn't he kill me?"

>
"Not his place, Angel. Maybe it's mine. Maybe one day when you least expect it there'll be payback for what you did to me."

>
"What I did to you? What you did to me! What you're making me do now!"

>
His ring broke Wesley's cheek after Angel squatted and delivered a brisk slap. Shaking his head negatively, Wesley smeared his backhand against the side of his face without flinching. "What YOU'RE doing because you want to, Angel. Do it. I dare you, you patronizing bastard! You don't think I've been trained for this? But it's harder to PHYSICALLY hurt me, isn't it? But it was, oh, so easy to undermine my authority with your girlfriend!"

>
"Now the truth comes out!" When Wesley reached up and grabbed him at the shoulders, Angel found himself pinned on the floor again with Wesley's fist glancing across his nose. He was impressed. Annoyed, but impressed before he bucked Wesley over. "Is that why you made me feed on her?" Crawling on hands and knees, he was ready to leap until a surrounding presence distracted him for a moment.

>
"Don't blame me for your appetite, Angel."

>
"Then don't blame me for losing your Slayers, Wesley. You're not mad at me. You're mad at Augustine because he took Cordelia instead of you!"

>
Wesley swung wildly, catching Angel's deflecting wrist. "Well,

lookee here. How would you know THAT'S exactly what I'm pissed off about? Revival with intuition?"

>
Angel sprung forward and pushed Wesley back hard into an erratic slide. Coming to a stop, he raised his open hand, prepared to erase the pomposity from Wesley's face but stopped just short of completion when the hand seemed to pulse its vehement disapproval from underneath the wrapping.

>
"Not intuition, Wesley," he answered, his anger dissipating into despair. "Intimate knowledge. Because that's why I'm pissed off, too."

>
Wesley, heaving, squinted at Angel. Angel, also heaving, ignored the examination to draw his legs to his chest and bury his head into the top of his knees. Moaning, Wesley tried not to concentrate on the howling pain from his possibly-dislocated jaw.

>
"Hey, Angel. How's your hand?" she asked as she reached down to separate the pair. Lifting Wesley's chin, she studied his bruised eye before expressing displeasure over the new scratch. "You guys! Separate. Now, scoot!"

>
"You're... back!" Squeezing his eyes, Angel reopened them slowly, pleased to discover he wasn't dreaming.

>
"By the way, Wesley," Cordelia began as she plopped down beside him with a few of her shopping bags, "Angel never kept Buffy from you. She just always liked Giles better. Besides, you were too busy flirting with me half the time to do your job right." When Angel almost laughed, she administered her most stern look at him. "Hey! We don't want to get into your drama, do we?"

>
Wesley attempted to avoid Augustine's scrutiny when, after the old man deposited the rest of Cordelia's bags by her side, he took his turn to lift Wesley's chin and give the young man a once-over.

>
"Oh, my God, Cordelia!" Wesley exclaimed, pulling away from the attention as she danced a skirt in mid-air. "Is that shantung? And, don't tell me those are the Manolo's you put your name on the waiting list for! You were number 240! How did--" He looked at Augustine with disbelief as he was handed his glasses and a cup of tea. "Magic! SIR!" He didn't attempt to disguise his abhorrence. "For retail! Really!"

>
Augustine shrugged.

>
"No fair! Council wouldn't even allow me one pair of tailor-mades before I came to America. I had to go off the rack at Spenser and Marks, off-price if you please! She must have thousands of dollars in merchandise here--"

>
"I bought you something, Wesley." Cordelia flashed a huge grin as she tapped Wesley's arm with the designer shopping bag.

>
"Ooooh, really?" After setting his cup on the floor, Wesley eagerly received his present, carefully extracting it from its tissue wrap. "Is this cashmere? Oh. It's beautiful! Thank you."

>
"I KNEW you'd like it. I got something for you, too, Angel, but I'll give you it later."

>
"You'll have to get a nice pair of pants to go with that, Wes," Angel commented. He reached in and out quickly to feel the quality of the fine knit while Wesley unmercifully leered at him.

>
Augustine chuckled, "yes, please do, Wyndham-Price. I don't know of anyone who wears linen anymore."

>
"See, Wesley," Cordelia agreed when Wesley approved of another purchase. "I've been trying to hook you up in the style department. So has Angel..."

>
"Well, I just don't like synthetics. Angel can wear them fine."

Microfibers look great clinging to his shoulders but I don't have his bulk. I much prefer natural fibres."

>
"He does have a point there about his frame, Miss Chase. Although, the retirement community ensemble you've got on there.... When DID you get so old? Tsk. Tsk. Tsk." After Augustine handed Angel a cup, he bent over and took hold of Wesley's elbow. "Enough with your Cotton Incorporated moment. Come, Wyndham-Price, let Miss Chase have a moment with her employer while I tend to those injuries."

>
The much older man dabbed just inside Wesley's nostril with the cotton swab. "She's quite something," he commented, going about his medical attendance. "No wonder he's so charmed. She's just enchanting!"

>
Wesley rolled his eyes and pushed Augustine's hand aside as he studied Angel and Cordelia in the center of the room. "It's a good thing you brought her back when you did, I guess..."

>
"Or what? Hmmm? You'd be dead?" Augustine pulled a chair and followed Wesley's attention. "He wouldn't have killed you. Maybe broken a limb or something to teach you a lesson. What possessed you to grapple with a vampire?"

>
"Stupidity."

>
"Oh, hardly, I'd say." When Wesley turned to him skeptically, Augustine beamed at his former student. "He's taken by her, absolute captivated. Wouldn't say I blame him at all. What do you make of the situation?"

>
"I try not to make anything of it. And, don't look at me that way. I'm not jealous. She knows how to handle him, I guess." He snorted acrimoniously. "Cordelia, the Vampire Trainer. Has a clever ring to it. Might make a comedic television show."

>
"I don't know, Wyndham-Price. It sounds like you're jealous to me. But of whom? She's too young for you to be romantically involved with and I'm not seeing anything romantic between them. Odd, whatever it is they've got. No. I think you're jealous of her. He indulges her, but he won't with you. He makes you work for your affection."

>
Wesley winced. "You make it sound so... licentious. He's just a really good guy and I think she takes advantage of him." He studied the pair very carefully and thought aloud, "I'm afraid he'd quite literally allow her to get away with murder."

>
Augustine considered the ominous tone in Wesley's voice, ignoring it by tapping the worried young man for attention. "In that fight, you knew what you were doing. Maybe you don't know why. But you made him fight YOUR fight and when he took the upper hand, he was still at YOUR mercy. Funny."

>
Wesley heaved, "I'm SO pleased to still be able to entertain you with my own comedic situation, Sir. At least some things never change."

>
Augustine stifled his chortle. "It's FUNNY, Wesley, all those years I had you in training I couldn't do what, within a few months, a vampire has taught you to. Perhaps it's good he doesn't indulge you. You've finally started using your instincts. But don't show him all the tricks up your sleeves. He's still a demon, young man, and you might want to hold onto something in reserve... Just in case."

>
Cordelia tipped her head left, then right to study Angel's hand. "That's a trippy trip, Angel. And now you feel great?"

>
"Depending on the definition of 'great'." He grimaced when she prodded the swollen still-tender area. "Did he tell you what it means? Why he did it?"

>
"Just something about Prophecy." She tried to rewrap the gauze but gave up on her disorderly attempt, balling the bandage before setting it into the center of Angel's palm. "You know, it just hit me. This must really hurt like a mo-fo."

>
"CORDY!" Angel barked.

>
The two men looked away from their private conversation and studied Cordelia standing shock-still in the center of the room at Angel's fingertip length, his wounded hand swept far behind his back. After staring her down, his disapproval remained even after he stormed away.

>
"At least he's beginning to have some idea of what's occurred to him," Wesley remarked quietly as Cordelia inhaled and exhaled deeply before turning to join them.

>
Augustine disagreed. "He has no concept of what any of this means, Wesley. To him, the wound is merely a logo--no more or less important than a swoosh or a sea shell. His fear is, perhaps, the crucifix means nothing more to her. Are you alright, Miss Chase?"

>
She smiled wanly as she reached into the refrigerator and extracted a beverage to offer the gentleman. When he declined, she took another out and placed one before Wesley before taking a chair of her own.

>
Augustine couldn't determine what puzzled him more after that. Whether it was the continued impairment of the young woman's spirits or the onset of one of Wesley's allergy attacks when Miss Chase made a comment about the bad timing of her flippant remark before switching the two drinks, remembering Mango was Wesley's favorite.

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>
"How much of that did you see?" Angel questioned Augustine. Too much of the late afternoon was streaming in through the office windows but he was too drained to get up and shutter them.

>
"Almost all of it. Miss Chase decided the two of you 'needed to stop being such girls' and let you have at one another." After accepting the offered chair, Augustine leaned forward with his palm open. He smiled, patient when Angel seemed to think twice before extending his hand for inspection.

>
Augustine examined his handiwork, touching the symbol pensively. "I figured you'd be no different than the others," he commented cryptically.

>
When the old man smoothed the wound, the swelling reduced considerably; the throbbing lessened to a sting; the searing fire softened to a comforting warmth. He wanted to ask so many questions, but the only one Angel managed was, "the others?"

>
"HMMMMMMMM. Very few Warriors survive the initial ritual."

>
That wasn't especially comforting to know and he pushed away his sudden thoughts. "You have to take Cordelia away. And Wesley. Both of them. Away from here... From me. I'm destroying them." That overwhelming sense of failure swept through his core and he struggled to keep it from his appearance. "I should be doing this on my own, anyway. Do you think you can take the Gift from Cordelia? Make her normal again?"

>
"First off, Warrior Angel, Miss Chase doesn't want to be whatever 'normal' is. She threatened to 'book me' and escape if I didn't bring her back. I don't understand half of what she says, but I got the feeling I don't ever want to be booked." He acknowledged Angel's slight good humor. "And Wesley? I have no place to take him back to, ultimately. No, their place is here with you for the time

being because whatever you're doing, you shouldn't be doing on your own. I won't deliberately avert Prophecy."

>
"They're part of Prophecy?" he asked hesitantly.

>
"Perhaps. Or not. A puzzle, Angel. Prophecy is bits and pieces of this and that all swirled together where none of it means anything while most of it is of great import."

>
"You sound like The Oracles." Augustine's laughter, completely unexpected, troubled Angel. "You're from The Powers That Be? You ARE the Powers That Be? Running the Council of Watchers?"

>
"Oh, no. I don't run Council. It's been ages since I've had much authority there, even. And I'm not of your Powers That Be. I am a Visioner. Not the only one although there are fewer of us than there used to be, at least on the side of good. And you, dear Angel, may actually be THE Warrior." He frowned slightly at Angel's response. "You look relieved. You were expecting to find out you weren't?"

>
"I'm just glad you didn't tell me I was The Promised One. You know," he hovered his face-down palm above the desktop.

>
"Then it's a good thing I haven't told you the spell's meaning. Unless, of course, Wyndham-Price figured it out? He was always the best translator. Anything he could do on his own..." When Angel's face brightened with anticipation, Augustine let the subject drop. Not his place to share a man's secrets, he reminded himself.

>
"At any rate, you continue to surprise me. Everyone is a Promised One at some point in their lives, Angel. I became one of yours and you'll eventually meet everyone you've been promised to. Your humility, though, is admirable. Despite the fact your cure may have tremendous significance, you have enough respect--or skepticism--to avoid exalting yourself."

>
"So this means--"

>
"It doesn't matter what it means. At least for right now. You'll have many more trials during the journey ahead to dwell on the symbolism or spiritual connotations. Or to consider that, perhaps, nature decided to amuse itself and it may actually mean nothing. You have to find your own beliefs, Angel, just like the life you have is only yours to lead. Just keep remembering you don't have to do any of this all by yourself."

>
"Am I interrupting?" Peeking in from a crack in the door, Wesley waited until Augustine rose and offered his chair before entering the room.

>
"Where's Cordelia?" Angel asked, worried.

>
"Talking to Harry. Telling her all about EVERYTHING. I had to escape. I hope you don't mind..." He tried to fight the disappointment he felt when Augustine fled to the outer office.

>
"Admiration," Angel commented. To Wesley's raised brows, Angel tipped his head and added, "that look in his eyes. He's proud of you." Just as expected, Wesley tucked his chin to blush. "I'm sorry. You know. For beating up on you. I should know better--"

>
"I provoked you, Angel. I should know better."

>
"You didn't. I mean... The pact you think I have with The Powers That Be... There isn't one. They've never actually mentioned I could or couldn't beat up or kill humans. Doyle didn't give me a list of do's and don't's when he showed up."

>
"Oh. I just thought that since Whistler's been keeping Mahoe in line... Perhaps it's the PTB's highest form of compliment, Angel, that you don't need direct supervision."

>
"Yeah, I guess. But it would be nice to know sometimes if I'm

doing my job OK."

>
"Well, I can identify with that situation." He averted Angel's inspection, rising to close the elevator grate when Cordelia rang for it.

>
"But thanks for the invitation, anyway." When Wesley's strange expression lightened, so did Angel's anxiety. "So, again. I'm really sorry. I'll try not to ever do it again."

>
"And that's it?" Wesley retook his seat to watch Angel replay their conversation in his mind. "You're not going to ask me to forgive you?"

>
"I said I was sorry, Wes. That's all there is to it. You don't need to forgive me."

>
"Is your existence so singular, Angel, that you require so little from the people around you? By refusing to ask for my forgiveness, your apology means very little other than to let me know I do not participate in your life. That's very one-sided because you're very much a participant in mine."

>
"Stop being such a girl, Wesley. Sorry is sorry. I am. Sorry. I don't see why you're making such a big deal out of this."

>
The 's' in his name wasn't lost on Wesley and it, unexpectedly, irritated him. "Because it IS a big deal. To me. It's not my duty to forgive you but my privilege. And if I can't, then it's my loss. But by denying me access to the most basic aspect of my humanity, you're not only hurting yourself--you're hurting me. You're saying--"

>
"Not much of ANYTHING, Wesley," Cordelia replied with the elevator's grate squealing in harmony. "Did anyone ever tell you that you use way too many words when you talk? Ask him to forgive you, Angel."

>
"It doesn't count if you tell him to, Cordelia. He has to do it because he wants to."

>
"You want to, right, Angel? So go ahead and do it or else this guy is NEVER going to shut up."

>
When Cordelia rolled her eyes at Wesley's sneer, Angel rose. It really didn't matter the two had begun to bicker again because he was able to tune them out. Shifting the blinds a little more open, he was just pleased things were beginning to return to normal.

>
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>
Mahoe stormed the office just as Angel concluded his explanation of Cynthia Minn's confession. He ignored the three humans and pushed Whistler aside to take a step directly in front of Angel's desk.

Glaring, he placed his knuckles on the desktop and menacingly leaned across to the other demon.

>
"I can't believe you're still alive!"

>
Angel, annoyed, huffed, "but I do believe you're still a prick!"

>
Whistler bumped the subversive Warrior out of the way and retook his stance. "Well, we're all shafted, Angel, because the piece of her puzzle means nothing without the board. We have no what's, when's, where's, or why's." When that only made four fingers up, Whistler balled his fist and threatened the still-looming Mahoe.

>
Stepping forward, Wesley smoothed a pencil-marked piece of steno paper on Angel's desktop, placing the infamous necklace next to it.

"I found this paper on LÃfo before disposing of the body--a nasty bit of business, might I add, because a Fowr'Cedcorudor is not only horrid to look at on the outside--"

>
"That pendant. May I see it?" After Angel handed the necklace to him, Augustine rubbed at the pearly stone for a moment before setting it back on the desk. "And that looks like a map of some sort. Do you

know the location?"

>
"I can't believe the bad guys would drop off a body complete with an accurate map of their whereabouts, Elder Augustine," Whistler remarked. "They've been too smart, too discreet. Too long."

>
"Have they? I found this tucked away in--" After gaining everyone's attention, Wesley reached across to study the map a little closer. "Well, never mind where it was tucked. They obviously didn't search the body. They just wanted to make their point. And they wanted to be very loud about it. Minn's brother didn't need to flash himself when he came."

>
"True," Augustine nodded. "Sounds as if someone's getting very presumptuous."

>
Wesley happily accepted the validation. "Precisely!"

>
"Interjection."

>
"What, Cordelia?"

>
"THAT was an interjection."

>
She genuinely confounded him at times with those unexpected flashes of intelligence. "What does grammar have to do with deciphering what few clues we have?" Wesley asked, trying to maintain his reserve.

>
"Nothing. But what if they're so proud of themselves they can't wait for the big day without sneaking the surprise?" After all eyes turned to her, Cordelia grinned. "They think they're smarter than everyone else, WESLEY, so they have to show off."

>
Augustine mentally applauded Miss Chase's humbling expertise. "Of course their overconfidence could be generating carelessness. They must be close to setting their offensive off. Perhaps everything is already in place and the troops are just getting antsy."

>
"It's just too simple, though," Angel disagreed.

>
"But is it, Angel? Are you so been-there/done-that, simple won't do ya anymore? Check it out, what if everyone is waiting for some really really HUGE, major, giant, apocalyptic event and it only turns out to be something kinda normal, average, mundane--"

>
"Enough, Cordelia! I GET it."

>
"Wait, Wes." When Angel involuntarily raised his right hand, he glanced at it while detecting Cordelia's nodding head in his peripheral vision. "I just don't like it, though," Angel commented, trying to imagine a better idea. Giving up, he opened his top drawer and tossed the Plymouth's keys up to Wesley. "But it looks like we should probably take a look, if nothing else."

>
"The HUMAN's not coming!" Mahoe objected.

>
Angel eyed the protesting demon condescendingly. "Maybe YOU'RE not coming, Mahoe. Did that happen to cross your mind? Whistler, I need you to stay in case Cordelia has a Vision. Or to stop Lord Council, here, if he decides he wants to take her out with the plastic again."

>
"Mahoe's such a loser, Whistler." Seated in Angel's vacated chair, Cordelia studied her nails. "Where'd you get him from?"

>
"We're getting 'em from wherever we can find 'em, Cordy," Whistler replied. Taking a chair, he kicked his heels up on the edge of the desk. "Wow, Aug. Could you have waited until the LAST possible minute to show up? We almost lost him the other morning. So, when you going back?"

>
As Cordelia gasped, Augustine considered the question. He remained silent for the entire duration of her Vision before stepping forward to begin the soothing massage remedy. He regarded Whistler.

"I'm not sure when I'm going back, old friend" he commented ruefully.
"But let's see what the Messenger has to say about that."

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>
Angel landed softly, perfectly poised, as he dropped from the skylight into the empty office. Stepping out of direct sunlight, he finally dropped his protective covering and waited for the rope and his two companions to follow. Wesley expertly descended and took a place next to Angel while the two of them waited for Mahoe. They shared an unsympathetic, knowing glance when Mahoe lost his foothold and slid the last 10 feet.

>
"Where'd they get this guy from?" Angel whispered rhetorically in Wesley's ear before rounding back for the door.

>
He passed Wesley one of his sheathed knives along with a cautious glance and the human, as always, acknowledged the implication. That didn't mean Wesley would actually avoid conflict, of course; but, he was good at humoring Angel's concern.

>
"Fuerza de la Escogida," Wesley butchered, reading from a piece of stationery on the desk by their exit. After swallowing with some difficulty, he turned to Angel, attempting to subdue his apprehension.

>
"I still don't get how you can speak all these demon tongues, Wes, but every romance language you touch... Fuerza de la Escogida," Angel repeated correctly, his beautiful pronunciation in marked contrast to Wesley's. After completing the linguistic display, he actually took the time to translate. "Strength of--"

>
"Force of The Chosen One."

>
"Furza esco," Mahoe echoed, nodding his head. "Whatever, ladies. Let's get a move on!"

>
"I don't like this, Angel. I've been trying to avoid reading too much into what's been going on, but now this has gotten very strange."

>
Angel couldn't help but make light of the irony in Wesley's statement. "Strange is what we do, Wesley. Although, I totally get your point. I say we go tech-y about this--find an accessible terminal and pilfer information." He waited a moment longer and, after a nearby presence faded from his sensory perception, he led the three of them into a vacant hallway.

>
"Dammit! These longer days," Angel complained, quickly backing against the wall.

>
Wesley couldn't have agreed more as he looked both ways down the skylighted hallway. He rushed back to retrieve Angel's cloak from their touchdown point, trying to shake the unholy connotations of where they had broken into and why the top floor had been constructed the way it was.

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>
Whistler squirmed, uncomfortable with his disguise. "You realize this is probably NOT going to work. And what if he's already prepared for you? I say just let Angel and the guys handle it--" But when Augustine rang the delivery door bell anyway, he fell silent.

>
Cordelia waited until she was given her signal before leaving the safety of the luxury rental. Stepping into the building, she averted her eyes from Augustine and Whistler undressing two unconscious workers. "I take it one of those is going to be for me?" she asked, unthrilled with the prospect of wearing some stranger's uniform.

>
Whistler held up the jumpsuit and shook his head in dismay. "Too long for me, obviously. Although, Aug, you could..." He wiggled his fingers at the uniform, the suggestion left incomplete when Cordelia

whisked it from his hands before smacking him across the arm. "Hey!" he half-complained, wishing he could find some way to get her to touch him again.

>
"If Walty keeps doing the poofy-do for everything, he's going to get real tired, real fast. He shouldn't be wasting his strength. We can spend a little time working at this, Whistler. Not that I wanna break into a sweat or anything like this guy," she sniffed, unhappy with the condition of her scented apparel.

>
"Cordy shouldn't even be here," Whistler vented while rolling under the sleeves and hems of his uniform. Feeling only partially dressed without his customary hat, he tousled the wisps of hair on his scalp. "Unless you're waiting for another Vision?" he ventured.

>
"We'll see." Augustine waved two fingers in reply and his accomplices prudently followed the silent command. "Miss Chase is here because she's supposed to be, Whistler. If for no other reason than the fact Angel will need her."

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>
Wesley took one deep breath, then another. He knew it wasn't impossible--for him--to spend the rest of the evening suspended behind a corner instead of investigating another corridor. When he reflected on how ridiculous it had been for him to insist they separate at Mahoe's suggestion, he found himself longing for some of the courage that had caused him to initiate the earlier fight with a vampire.

>
Being with Angel always made him feel more courageous, he knew in his heart, and attempting daring deeds on his own just didn't have the same appeal.

>
The Saturday evening atmosphere of the building should have relaxed him more, but there were too many concepts running through his mind. He hated being confronted by co-incidence; hated thinking that, perhaps, life really was already formulated and just waiting for the actual performance. A thought of Galina's brief presence in his life made him wince. Was everything that occurred--including all the people or beings he met--only meant to predict the next series of events, or the next individuals?

>
He struggled to concentrate only on the task directly ahead. But, instead, he could only focus on the fact he was waiting to take another next step in his repetitious life without company. Doom, invisible but genuine, seemed to jeer as it shoved at him and he despised that feeling more than anything. "Stop it, Wez," he whispered to himself, anxiety threatening to completely immobilize him. "I can do this," he spoke, willing to accept self-delusion for bravery if that was all he could summon.

>
"Do what?" she asked with her red fingernails walking across his shoulder blade.

>
The obnoxious tone of her lower-class accent made Wesley freeze before he felt her presence--a familiar presence. Her smile was sultry when she eased around to face him and he was captured by the recognition of what she was and her pale, strange beauty. When she touched him, he gulped a breath, instantly flustered by the equally familiar chilly contact.

>
"Look what I found!" she called out as she pushed Wesley beyond the corner.

>
After taking a worried look around, Mahoe hurried to them. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice hoarse from trying to restrain his obvious dissatisfaction with the turn of events.

>
She moaned enthusiastically, her hand idly traveling sideways from her thigh to her earlobe while the human's fear permeated her being. "I'm going to take him," she stated. "Do you want to watch?"

>
Closing her eyes, she leaned into Wesley and waited for her transformation, disappointed with being far too aroused by the human's emotional state for it to occur. The intensity of her bloodlust diminished somewhat after Mahoe wrenched her away and tossed her against the wall.

>
Mahoe yanked Wesley aside. "I'll be so happy when things are back to normal," he complained. "Obviously this is the place, but where are the hybrids?"

>
"All over the place, Mahoe," she replied, amused when the sound of her voice seemed to physically pain him. "I'm having a hell of a time trying to figure them out." Still intrigued by the human, she forked her fingers for Wesley's attention and was unable to hide her insult when he quickly disconnected the optical hold she tried to place on him. "They have no fear, is all. Otherwise, they seem completely human."

>
"But--"

>
"GO!" She listened intently and waved them in the opposite direction, disappointed to lose the human. She was still pouting when the guard advanced on her.

>
"You shouldn't be here," he warned. Lifting one hand to her arm and placing the other on his nightstick, the Fuerza guard made strict eye-contact.

>
His mistake.

>
She had no difficulty holding this one's gaze as she sidled up to him. Her glassy fingertips gently lifted the collar away from his oatmeal-colored neck and she savored his reaction--pure fear, purely human. She wanted to say something, then thought the better of it when she considered how, sometimes, even she was annoyed by the quality of her voice. Instead, she studied him silently, pleased as his fear elevated to further sweeten his cache.

>
The persona eased into place and she bared her fangs. Tipping upwards, she paused briefly to tantalize him with a few rapid strokes of her tongue before discontinuing his mortality. The initial wound was just miniscule enough to allow a droplet of blood to meander across her white tooth. The ever-deepening perforation caused his life to explode within her mouth, almost faster than she could absorb it until she plunged against him more powerfully, almost to the extent of crushing him before she drank the man to death.

>
When he collapsed on the last exhale of his life, she knelt down in kind. "That's it, luv," she spoke, the lovely structure of her human features returning from their demonic guise. "Off to no-more-a-man land with you!" And, with a simple pop to the side of the head, the ex-guard lopped over.

>
Giggling profusely, she rose and tidied the corner of her mouth with her pinky. Slowly returning the way she had arrived, she reflected on this latest kill, finding delight over how little her satisfaction had at all to do with feeding her appetite.

>
She was powerful against these weaker beings, superior to them in every way. Their emotions left them malleable by her mind; their physical natures, vulnerable to her touch. Especially prey to her bite, humans were expendable and the pleasure she derived from consuming their unworthy existences was more exciting than anything she could have ever expected, even from his wildest dream.

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>
"What happened to him? C'mon Wes, focus!" Duplicating Wesley's breath, Angel kept an attentive eye, attempting to calm the terrified man.

>
"I saved him from a vamp," Mahoe explained while pacing nervously. "Supposedly these hybrids are all over the place. I guess

bringing Wesley along WAS good for something. 'Scared shitless' is one of the greatest signs of being a full-blown human she happened to mention."

>
"So, I smell fear fine. How about you?" Angel distanced his senses away from Wesley to concentrate. That wasn't fear he smelled and he protectively swept Wesley back.

>
"Sorry. Not one of MY many talents," Mahoe sarcastically replied as he drew his weapon on the surprised sentry he leapt at.

>
Angel, faster, reached the encounter before Mahoe's blade and the guard was knocked unconscious before he had a chance to cry out. Looking around and then up, Angel pointed at the ceiling, disgusted. "Thanks alot!"

>
Mahoe followed the direction and shrugged at the camera. "You know, Angel, it's gonna be tough to take these things out if you're not going to kill them. What's up with that? I though your types got off on the bloodlust."

>
"He might have been HUMAN," Wesley spat, pointing at the guard. "The two of you were speaking Bur'Turl. Idiot! I've been trying to figure out for DAYS why nothing seems to matter to you--" Preoccupied with his thought, Wesley almost missed the deliberate stab, unaware how he anticipated it to dive for safety.

>
Angel swung his axe broadside at Mahoe, thwacking the other Warrior across the back to send him stumbling forward. "RUN, Wesley!" he shouted only to realize, once the command left his mouth, how redundant it was, grunting his displeasure while a group of ten circled the three of them.

>
Angel backed towards Wesley, both their weapons at front. "Don't touch this fight, Wes. You have no way to tell--"

>
"Whether or not to cross that line? It doesn't matter, Angel. With whatever is going on, there are too many lives at stake."

>
"And, in this room, yours is the only one that counts." When Wesley stared down his advancing man, Angel shook his head. "WESLEY!" he barked.

>
"One question, Angel, and then this conversation is over... Are they human or not?"

>
With Wesley's fear undeniably absent, Angel was horrified when Mahoe sliced two of the guards across their midsections, instantly rendering death with the power behind the swipes. "I don't know, Wesley. That's the problem." Angel killed two as Wesley rendered another immobile, the smell of human blood drowning out all other odors. He decapitated the male Wesley had lunged at and, in one motion, lifted the fallen being's sword to toss at his associate.

>
Wesley nodded in understanding of the silent command that accompanied the weapon. He tried following it to the best of his abilities, ramming the hilt of the sword between his next attacker's eyes to render the being unconscious.

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>Each of the three bobbed their heads in silence until, after losing count again, Whistler looked at his watch and heaved his doubt.

"There's too many of them and not enough time, Aug. Let's just find the guys and get out of here and just wait for the next go round of Prophecy."

>"Ninety!" Cordelia flipped her ponytail for emphasis and waited for confirmation.

>"Ninety, it is, Miss Chase." Turning to Whistler, Augustine placed his hand on the other being's shoulder in consolation. "He's one of the few that has ever survived, Whistler. He may be the only one who

might be able to finish the ritual. I've spent too many years waiting for the 'next go 'round of Prophecy' the way it is and now look at this. There's only failure in retreat, not in the attempt. I should have averted all of this years ago."

>"I don't know what you're yada-da-ing about, Walty, but ya might wanna think about letting go of the self-absorption and getting on with whatever you've got to do if there's a problem with time." Cordy yawned enthusiastically. When a honking siren sounded, she adjusted her posture more comfortably in their viewing nest. "Big hint, much?"

>The transparent doors to each of the cubicles silently drew up and the beings rose to filter out. Each took precise steps onto the holding area decks, shuffling behind one another to wait patiently for their weapons--a sword and a stake.

>"Ooooooooooh. That's probably not a good sign," she innocently surmised.

>Augustine eyed the situation and nodded. "That, Miss Chase, is the understatement of the ages."

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>Running through another corridor, Angel half-dragged Wesley behind him. Other than knowing, for sure, they had descended another of the complex's five floors, where they were could have been exactly where they had been five minutes prior.

>"It's worse than Hong Kong! I don't understand how anyone gets around in this place!" Angel called out. When Wesley didn't answer, he stopped and turned.

>Leaning bent against the wall, with his hands on his knees, Wesley gasped for his breath. "It's just like the Olde Estate at Council, Angel. You know where to go because you KNOW."

>Angel unfocused his eyes and listened to the approaching footfall, trying to count out the steps to determine how many were coming. Although out of practice as prey, he got a close enough count to know they needed to avoid the encounter. "OK, Wesley. So, if it's like Council, then GUESS. Which way?"

>"We were running Angel... And, if there were any visual markers..." He could hear the approaching march, as well, and took Angel's impatience as all the count he needed. "Oh, hell," he replied, bouncing his head against the wall, "how about we just try a door?"

>Angel took hold of the handle behind him and eased it down, his surprise probably mirrored by Wesley. "Simplicity is the key," he muttered, reaching across to throw Wesley, before himself, through the door.

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>Assured with Cordy's and Whistler's safety, Augustine ventured out into the immense complex. It was a beautifully designed facility, he noted, very physically different than Council. Despite its innovation, though, he could still sense the antiquity of tradition. That it was familiar was no surprise--they would always be joined in some way, no matter how many centuries distanced their separation.

>He had always held onto some hope the rift between the two factions would mend but the severance had been absolute. Too much dissent. The anger. Those dismissals and the wounded egos. Augustine still found it difficult to believe that a society's very existence impended on the fateful decision of one young woman.

>And it was as much true 500 years ago, as almost-one.

>Council had learned very little in either that one year or those 500. Over time, loyalty had become of the utmost importance. Failure was forgivable; but once allegiance was in question the answer was

censure. Disobedience was always disciplined. Severely. Often unjustly.

>Because the body had become more important than its hearts or its souls.

>There was a cost for minding the collective and, for the price paid, Council had become a spiritless organization run by men and women without vision--afraid to dream for fear of being caught at it. Children were taught to follow without question; trained to think for the whole instead of bringing insight or competition. And when One was chosen, she was used according to tradition without regard for personality or innate talent; without regard for relationships forged through honor and trust.

>And trust, he realized as he neared his objective, could be called into question over something as simple as one dissenting opinion, one caring decision, or one simple phone call.

>As Augustine made his way he wondered if it was the recognition of similarities that drew him, or the repulsion over differences. At any rate, when he stepped into the room, the male who faced him had not changed in the least since their last meeting and that made him sad in more ways than he could imagine.

>"The moment they said you left Council..." his Latin accent intoned, devoid of emotion.

>Duarte stood to examine the intruder. Her eyes bright with excitement, she stood witness to what had not occurred within generations--father and son, face to face. Rumors did not do justice to the resemblance--the same pale blue eyes; the identical jaw, nose, brow. But the way the features were arranged made them so opposite. With his errant white hair cut at the curve before a ringlet formed, Augustine's composition was kind, moderately bemused while Cort-Pinzã's angular face held his features in rigid formation.

>"Sirs," she whispered in reverence, unsure of whom she should actually be more in awe of.

>The petite woman appealed to him in a strange way, and Augustine fought the distraction she provided. Her full lips complimented the nearly-flat plane of her face. He detected cheekbones where none seemed to protrude, a brow line that sat barely higher than the soft set of her eyes--her vibrant almond-colored eyes. The almost-ebony hair...

>...He closed his eyes and pretended he was dreaming, but when he opened them again she was still there--more beautiful than she had been the mere second before. "Rosalie," he exhaled. She smiled lazily as she traced the curve of his cheek, studying the movements of her slender finger and he shuddered to fend off the arousal.

>"Eruwalt," she spoke against his mouth with her own.

>"Please," he whispered. "This temptation..." But the fingertip set against his lips cut the protest.

>He enveloped her with motion his arms had never practiced before that moment and she seemed to dissolve at his embrace. Movement and flesh, the sensuous sounds of human contact and, seemingly, hours later he lay there spent, his body weakened, his powers--

>"God," he spoke with utter presence of mind after opening his eyes to the truth of his empty bed. All that remained of Rosalie Cort was her scent on his linens and he clenched them against his chest with dread...

>"Oh."

>Cort-Pinzã derived immense pleasure from the heavy discomfiture

permeating the room as his protégé approached Augustine. "It took a moment, didn't it? But, she's perfection! And SHE'S entirely human, Father. I present to you, your present--Araceli Duarte."

>"But, without a soul..."

>"Yes, well. Fuerza's grandest project of all! Still a few aspects that need to be smoothed, but we've made a tremendous amount of progress. Much, much more than Council has. And, by the way, you can drop the holier-than-thou attitude. We're not so different, Council and Fuerza. Same results, just different ways about it."

>"NOT the same in any manner. If you continue to lead these modern men into temptation to play God--"

>Cort-Pinzón laughed derisively, cutting the older being off with his impertinent glance. "OLD ONE! Modern man IS God! But, because you still hold onto your delusions that The Council of Watchers is good and supreme, upholding the edicts passed down from--" He inhaled his tedium. "Now Who was it that supposedly passed along those edicts?"

>"You mock what you have NEVER understood." Augustine studied the young woman named Duarte, feeling his ancient heart twist. Other than the slight imperfection of her hairline and overly curvaceous bottom lip, she could have easily passed for Rosalie Cort and he bit his tongue to keep from reaching out for her...

>...She was beautiful, her skin toasted by the warm Palos summer sun and lit from within by motherhood. His heart could have very well been in her hand while she scoffed at him, her ridicule that scathing.

>"I cannot allow his birth, Rosalie. It would be an abomination against God and all mankind to bring him into the world."

>Her hand remained, impatiently. "Stay or go, Augustine, but the child will not die either way. We possess the True Slayer and now we will possess our Sorcerer."

>Without thinking, he placed his hand into hers and those embers he thought extinguished by her betrayal flared, set aglow by his undying affection. When she held him to her swell, he could feel the product of their alliance trembling there, unborn and already alive with fearsome potential.

>Rosalie stared at him, confused when she experienced the sudden change; the child growing within seemed to fight for its very existence. "YOU!" she shrieked, stumbling backwards from her chair. Holding her protruding belly, she stared at herself in horror. "WHAT DID YOU DO?"

>"You possess the Slayer--for now. But you will never possess a Sorcerer, Rosalie. At least, not with my help. Our business transaction is concluded. Keep your child. But he will never touch magic. They were my powers, Rosalie, that you stole with my seed. While I cannot take back the one, I do not have to provide the other."

>"As long as he lives, though, they will be of no use to you. Stay and help raise him, Eruwalt. Train him. But do not take his birthright," she pleaded.

>"Better I exist half a magician than to be the fool to trust your pleasant enticements again. I accept the loss as penalty for my fall, the error of my judgement..."

>The younger male slid his arm across Duarte's ribs and spoke in her ear before dismissing her. That he nuzzled her as he did it so was a gesture not lost on Augustine and Cort-Pinzón smiled victoriously.

>"You'll die today," Augustine stated flatly.

>"Not hardly. You didn't have the resolve to do it five centuries ago and you don't have it now."

>"Prophecy is in motion, Andres. My resolve has been restored." That statement seemed to give his son at least pause, if not fear. "The vampire Angel might very well be The Warrior of Prophecy."

>"But The Warrior is late, Father. The world will be distracted while Fuerza takes her prize and the hybrids are released into society. Like an ordinary fruit-fly, humanity will be diluted to non-existence."

>Eruwalt Augustine was not amused, nor was he completely fearful. "Your talented Cynthia Minn... A prime example of what you believe you've achieved?"

>"A shining example," Cort-PinzÃ³n replied proudly, allowing himself the slightest amount of sorrow for her passing.

>"When I bound your magic, Andres, did I also bind your intelligence? You are expecting your fabulous hybrids to destroy humanity from the inside-out, but have you taken into consideration what humanity will do to your hybrids?"

>"Trust me, that's not a concern."

>"No?" The older being straightened his bearing and looked down his nose at the younger. "The oldest pathogen in the book, Andres. Imitation. What you're doing. You think you're more original than Council but, in the end, you have your spies in place to guide your decisions. This young woman you've recreated to seduce me... She will never be Rosalie, no matter how well she walks the walk. And then, Cynthia Minn--basing her entire crime on the hopes of meeting the original. THEY know they're imitations, Andres. Just like you know you are. Without my magic, without procreation, you are what? Immortal. Only immortal. But, that does not make you special."

>"And, you are? No. You're just an old wizard. Not even of legendary status--no one will remember you as Council's Merlin. No one will remember you at all. Council is old and dying. All of you will be forgotten."

>"Yes, Council is old. Dying? No. Weak? Perhaps. But not without hope, Andres. The coming changes will do Council good and wake her up from her nap. And me? Oh, you do not know the half of me."

>"Father, in case you've forgotten, I AM the half of you."

Cort-PinzÃ³n chuckled at his own wit, taking to the edge of his desk to study Duarte when she returned wearing a revealing bias gown and holding two goblets of red. "And, Araceli will be happy to let you know if I measure up or not."

>Duarte sauntered to Augustine with a goblet extended, a pleasant smile upon her face. "Your wish, Sir. I am for you."

>Augustine, without thinking, took the glass from her hand. "This is a vile, evil place, Andres. What are you doing here? No morality. Fuerza's principles--whatever they were at one time, adulterated. We were the same. We had purpose. We protected mankind from the likes of what you've become."

>Duarte merely smiled as she sipped. Taking a step closer to Augustine, she placed her palm on his chest. "Stay, please. Take your place by your son."

>When the goblet dropped from Augustine's hand, he watched the deep red ooze into the taupe carpet fibers, fascinated by the design of the spill. "I never destroyed you, Andres, because I always felt guilty I couldn't love you. I thought Rosalie Cort stole my heart, completely. How odd, through these recent circumstances, to find that what I believed completely gone has been in operation all this time."

>"You LOVE me?" Cort-PinzÃ³n asked, dubious.

>"No. Never. And I was NEVER your father, merely an ingredient for your conception. And now, with the introduction of this beauty in front of me, you wish me to create your sons? Prophecy, Andres. All of it. To think, I was in the center generating it while I was supposed to its guardian."

>Cort-PinzÃ³n heaved his dismay before joining Araceli, taking her glass to drink heavily from it. "You SEE your place is with me. You know it. Holding my powers, my ability to procreate did what, dear Visioner? You could not withhold your Sight. I found a way to have my children and I created a flock. And I will rescue their Shepherd and place her into her honored place. You cannot avert Prophecy. It has its own destiny and will not be denied. We both know your precious Warrior will come along one day, but not today, and he will not be a vampire named Angel."

>Araceli nodded her agreement, continuing to offer her hand.

>"What is seen cannot be unseen, Andres? I no longer believe that." Augustine extracted a pearly white stone from his pocket and held it within the palm of his hand. He studied its simple beauty for a moment before returning his attention to the beings in front of him. "I have idly stood by and played a role that may or may not have been mine to play. I quit. Starting now."

>"Divert Prophecy? Augustine, really. How many of your contemporaries have tried the same and where are they now? You are too honor-bound by your traditions. If you need a little more time, just say so, but stop with the theatrics. You bore me."

>"Maybe not all of your 'offspring' will die today, Andres, but enough of them will. HUMANITY is the dominant species--just like it always has been--and they have been tending to my heart all this time. It may take a thousand years to put right what I set into motion, but it will be put right. And I believe that it's time to get started."

>The young woman studied the stone in Augustine's hand before turning to her creator, confused. "Andres?" she whispered, reaching out to caress the horror from his features, only to experience the emotion herself as the bones of her fingertips melted away with his face.

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>"So, now if you're a double-agent and Walty's a double-agent, does that make me and Angel double-agents by association? Because all I'm saying is it's not like life isn't complicated enough that we need to start trying to figure out who we're actually working for. I'll let you know, though, I'll probably do a pretty good job at SpyGirl but don't you think it would have been at least fair to ask me and Angel first?"

>"You're not going to make me blink, no matter how much you talk, Cordy. Just shut up and stare!" Whistler narrowed his eyes a little more to give off his most menacing look, but it only seemed to elate his stink-eye competitor and the toothy smile Cordy rendered almost made him swoon. "And there are NO double-agents. You work for Angel, Angel works for The Powers That Be and Wesley-- By the way, how's he been working out since you kicked his ass?"

>Cordy scrunched her nose in an effort to placate an itch. "Oh, he's alright. He's no Doyle, but Angel likes him OK. You blinked!"

>"Nuh-uh!" Whistler concentrated on counting her eyelashes. "So, you still miss Doyle? I never knew him, personally, but he didn't have a real good rep. You know, the drinking and debts. That's how he wound up with Angel--vampire duty. Bottom-level assignment."

>"Doyle was a really nice guy and Angel was good for him. He cut way down on drinking. Maybe hanging with Angel made him realize his problems weren't so bad after all. What could be worse than being dead and depressed about it?" She rotated her head in an effort to comfort her drying eyes. "Do the PTB still think Angel's, like, the dregs?"

>She deliberately blinked and leaned back against the railing, hugging her shoulders. "Cause Angel's really trying. I know it doesn't seem like it, but he likes people. Sure he's anti-social and he's got suck conversational skills, not to mention sometimes he just can't buy clue one--although his attention deficit disorder probably has alot to do with that."

>"And you like him, right?"

>Cordy smiled past Whistler. "He's the BEST, Whistler. And he's gonna pass this ritual, you'll see, and he's going to be the SuperGuy that everyone needs him to be."

>"Well, then, Miss Chase, I believe we need to go about proving your statement, don't we?"

>Whistler shrugged consolingly to Augustine, gracing him with a pat on the back before they started their journey. "So, what'll it be, Aug? Another few hundred?"

>Augustine sighed, taking a long moment to study Cordelia in the lead. "No. I've been cubbied away for far too long. Look at how much everything has changed!"

>"Yeah, I guess I don't even notice anymore. By the way, does she know where we're going?" he whispered about Cordy while wondering if there was anything she could wear that she wouldn't look good in.

"Cars. Using plastic for money. Although, I gotta admit, microwave ovens--now THAT was pretty huge. And the cell phone thing. Too bad the PTB can't get with the times, it would make Cordy's life a whole lot easier."

>Chuckling, Augustine could identify with the love-struck attitude of his friend. "Not technology, Whistler. Science advances.

Unfortunately. That is the rule. No, I'm speaking of them," he motioned with the top of his head at their guide. "Their hearts, their minds. They may actually be ready to encounter what's about to happen to their world."

>Whistler stopped in the corridor and glanced around. "So, is this really it? The fulfillment of Prophecy? What we've been waiting for?"

>Augustine's forehead crinkled to consider the questions before he answered, "this one, your Angel-- I believe he's THE Warrior. The real one, Whistler. But it still remains to be seen whether he will ever believe it. If he is, then Prophecy will follow his lead because I do not believe Prophecy can ever be his master." Offering his right hand, he clapped Whistler on the shoulder with the left. "Well, let's test the full restoration and get you out of here. Ready?"

>Whistler nodded in agreement. "Is there anything I can tell The Lords?" he asked. Beginning to feel the dematerialization, he was almost too busy concentrating on Cordelia's excitement to hear Augustine reply.

>"Tell Them it's a very exciting time again to be immortal."

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>As Angel tightened the tourniquet around his bicep, Wesley winced. He was exhausted beyond belief and hurt every place he could still feel. No matter how often he spit, he couldn't dispose of the foreign metallic taste from his mouth. "Uh. I guess you have to be undead to appreciate the flavor," he remarked, his usually cheery inflection

deadpan.

>Angel was grateful Wesley still had enough fight left to make jokes, even unintentionally. "Look, Wes. I've got to get you out of here and then-- What are you doing?"

>Wesley took Angel's injured hand and lifted it reverently. "You were willing to face your death, Angel, before Kate's case arrived. I noticed there was a look on your face..."

>He peered over the top of his glasses, stupefied by how badly even eyebrows could hurt, before studying the crucifix. The etching seemed drawn with a fine-tipped marker. The simplicity entranced him for a moment and then, with eyes shut, he drew it to his lips passionately, concentrating on its warmth before drawing Angel's hand to his cheek.

>"Don't," Angel whispered, disturbed. After Wesley released his hand, he stared at the faint cross upon Wesley's left cheek that remained only for a moment, as if branded there, before it faded away.

>"It's odd how you never know what you consist of until you've been faced with the ultimate challenge.

>"Noooooooooooo." Angel shook his head vehemently while squeezing his eyes. But when he reopened them, Wesley was still battered and bleeding--with a familiar look on his face. "I'm going to get you out of here, Wes. You just have to have some faith."

>"But, I DO have faith, Angel. Here," he tapped his the center of his chest for emphasis. "And, I believe, you may have found it too."

>"You know, this isn't the time for one of your spiritual discussions--"

>"I believe you're born with it, Angel. And throughout your lifetime, you're tested and you falter; you have your doubts; you may even completely lose it; but then something--or someone--happens along that makes you realize you're not just an empty vessel. That you're filled with Promise, and Hope, and Solace and that there's no reason to live--or die--alone."

>"Stop it, Wesley," Angel insisted. "You're pissing me off and you really don't wanna piss me off." He sensed the new opponents before he heard them and he rose with his axe drawn.

>"No, Angel. I don't want to piss you off because you're an unbelievably suck fighter when you fight mad. Of course, that's just my professional opinion and you can take it or leave it." Wesley strained to yawn, but his jaw wouldn't allow him full freedom. "How many do you think are coming? I might be able to take one, maybe two, but you're going to have to take the brunt of the force if you're not going to let me die. Do you think you can do as good a job with me as Cordelia did with you?"

>Angel had to admit how much he admired the guy as he turned towards the direction of their attackers' approach, only to be completely taken off-guard when they came from the opposite direction.

>"You know, by the way, Angel--" Oblivious to their situation Wesley continued his thoughts, wincing while inching his back up the wall to regain his footing, "if we get out of this situation, I just may have to take you up on that suggestion you made of going out whoring together."

>"Cordelia?"

>"Cordelia?" He stared at Angel, completed shocked. "I had NO idea you thought of her in that way. Do you really think that's such a good idea? You know, given your track record of... GRRRRRR?"

>"No, Wesley." Angel pointed sharply.

>"Ohmigod! Wesley!" Cordelia ran the rest of the distance and skidded stop, barely avoiding barreling into her associate. "You're, like, completely wrecked and some junk! Angel, couldn't you have protected him?"

>Too many questions were running through Angel's mind, but the first one that came out was, "what are you doing here?"

>Augustine turned after clapping Wesley on the shoulder, missing the thrashed human's woeful expression and Cordy's equally unhelpful attempt to assist. "Working," he answered, glancing at his watch, mentally making calculations.

>"5:58, Sir," Wesley prompted as Cordy helped him towards Angel. "And unless we've got a marine layer waiting for us outside, we're going to have a very difficult time getting Angel out of here."

>"I'll be fine, Wes. Let's worry about getting you out of here, first." Trying to divert attention from Wesley's concern, Angel hunched the man's exhausted frame against his, keeping his tone low, "and then we'll find a nice cathouse?" When he felt Wesley shrug in amusement, he added, "you know, it's good you're concerned, Wes. You know. About... Me. Everything? But it's not like the next woman I'm even remotely attracted to is gonna turn me evil. I mean, you know..."

>Silently agreeing, Wesley got the feeling he DID know but in the end it seemed the less important topic. "How did you manage to find us in this maze?" he asked their companions, grateful Angel's assistance was making his breathing less labored.

>He felt that whisper placed within his mind even before Cordelia, without turning, tapped her temple nonchalantly and Angel smiled, a little guilty over feeling possessive when the connotation of her gesture pleased him immeasurably. "Where are we going?" he asked, finally, as their corridor spilled into another identical one.

>"NOWHERE!"

>Mahoe jumped into their path and brandished his weapon proudly. His left eye had been gouged at some point and many of the tendons of his extremities were hanging in shreds like his clothing. He was wheezing, but still angry enough to fight.

>"Oh, I am SO through with you!" Wesley griped. Pushing off Angel's chest, feeling more annoyed than brave, he was willing to take his best shot.

>"Hey, Mahoe!"

>Wesley was utterly amazed at Mahoe's stupidity when the yellow being turned upon hearing his name, giving Cordelia access to his remaining eye with her index finger. Relieved for their safety, he leaned back comfortably after nodding his respect to his associate for her sense of whimsy as much as her success. With Mahoe disabled on the floor, succumbing to his pain and embarrassment, Wesley could have sworn Cordelia kicked the demon in the head while they all continued past.

>"Here we are," Augustine announced at the threshold of the compound's open courtyard.

>Angel mentally counted the steps across the sunny expanse. Even without being at a complete standstill, there was no way he was fast enough to make the distance. He glanced in the direction of the approaching din before up and around. Other than outside, there was no where else to move.

>"Life sucks, eh Luv?" she cackled. After rising from the bench she had been sleeping upon, she brushed one hand across Wesley's jaw while cleaning a tooth with a nail from the other. "But then, that's what's so good about it." When Wesley broke eye contact again, she

frowned.

>"Ooooooooooh, boy, Angel. What's SHE doing here?" Without a second thought, Cordelia stepped in front of Wesley.

>Angel was stunned the way it way, but more so by the shoving match Wesley and Cordelia began in order to determine who was actually going to stand in harm's way. "HEY!" he barked.

>Cordy and Wes abruptly stopped and stared at one another before turning their attention on the vampiress. Without warning, they both gave her a shove.

>"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Angel stepped forward, but stopped himself just shy of the sunbelt, with Cordy and Wes in his way. "Dru?" he called weakly.

>Free-falling back into the sunlight, her arms windmilled. Her shrill scream deepened while smoke rose from her skin, the cool blue underhue gradually turning more golden. The fallen female, more amused than anything else, propped up on her elbows and stared back at the four confused spectators as the clothing she wore seemed to scream at its seams with the restoration of her more ample figure from its camouflage of persona.

>"Bur'Turl feather demoness," Augustine commented, genuinely concerned. "To take on the complete characteristics of an assumed identity... My. Her kind was supposedly extinct centuries ago."

>"Sir," Wesley began as he tried to assist an obviously distressed Angel, "I think that it's pretty safe to presume that NOTHING is as extinct as it should be."

>"I take it you were supposed to know her?" Augustine turned to Angel and lifted the vampire's hand to view it approvingly. Afterwards, he examined Wesley's arm and, with a swipe of his hand, healed the wound.

>"One of mine," Angel barely replied, trying to maintain his composure and having a difficult time of it.

>"Alright, it's time. Out with you all!" Augustine nudged at Wesley and Cordelia before Angel. "And out with you, too!"

>Angel fought backwards when Augustine tugged at him, natural instinct taking over. He reached out for the entry's edge in an attempt to find purchase. "Don't make me burn!" he pleaded, not caring how cowardly he sounded, using every ounce of his strength to sway towards...

>No safety.

>"Well, I've got work to do then," Augustine replied, pointing to draw Cordelia's return. "We didn't come all this way for your Angel to be consumed by circumstance, Miss Chase," he commented walking past her.

>Standing rigid in the archway looking out, Angel listened to the charge of his approaching death. The chameleon cackled again before Wesley's knee conducted her into silence.

>"You know, if we stay here, Wesley's gonna be out there all by his lonesome," Cordelia mentioned matter-of-factly.

>Angel stared. "He looks scared."

>Her face got all tangley in thought. "Nah. I don't think so. I think he looks more like he's seriously wishing he had staked your ass last year when he had the chance." When Angel, resigned, nodded in agreement, she plunked him across the forehead.

>"OW!" Cordelia confused him. Always at a really bad time.

>"Angel, you dufe! Wesley IS scared. And you know what? I'm scared."

>Angel swallowed and then quietly admitted, "me, too," afraid she'd think less of him.

>"So, you know what THAT means then, don't you?"

>He seriously didn't have a clue. That sun looked especially bright this morning and that crowd just kept getting louder. He realized he had a difficult time hearing her say, "you're not alone" because he was too busy overconcentrating. That, and wondering where the hell a hallucination of Doyle was when he actually needed one.

>"Harry said I should have never made such a big promise to you about not letting you die. But, I think I never should have given up on my word. Now, I'm not saying if you step out there you're not gonna become Cinderella, but I am gonna tell you that if you do, I'm never going to forget you, Angel. Because you saved MY life and all I've been trying to do is return the favor. And sometimes remembering someone really is the best way to never let them die. You know, like you did for Doyle with his monument and here."

>Studying that serene face of hers, Angel felt Cordelia touch upon the center of his chest. Backlit by the brightening day, she seemed to glow from within. Her expression never wavered, even after he the arrival of the troops reflected in her eyes.

>"Let me fight, Cordelia. Whatever Augustine can do to get you and Wesley out of here, let him do it. But I can't burn. I... I just can't go out that way."

>"Like, ew! I really want to see you torch? That's, like, such trauma I don't need to try to get over any more than watching you get destroyed by an army. There's ninety of them, Angel, give or take, and just one little sun. Take your pick."

>She took a step backwards and held out her hands to him. And that's where they remained, unwavering, as she met his face with hers. "Just like that Bible guy, Angel, walking on water. What you believe."

>He really hated when she used simile. "He almost drowned, Cordelia, because he DIDN'T believe."

>"Nuh-uh, Angel. That's where you're wrong. He ALMOST drowned, but he didn't because he believed just enough."

>"A little bit goes a long way?" He was pretty sure that wasn't the point of the story, though.

>"That's what I'm talkin' 'bout, Angel. A little bit of the real deal."

>He laughed in spite of himself at the absurdity of her logic. "Man, we've gotta start getting you to church."

>Cordy blinked at him. A couple of times. "We. You said 'we', Angel. C'mon. You know you wanna."

>"So, what is it you're asking me to believe, Cordelia? Because I'm seriously thinking I have a better chance up against ninety..."

>"That you can do this, Angel. That's all. We've come as far as my promise can take you and now the rest of the test you have to do on your own. Just not by yourself." She motioned backwards with her head and took another step away. With her hands still offered, she lowered her voice and looked at him really honest, with one eye kinda squinty, "we shouldn't leave Wesley hanging, Angel. He needs you."

>Wesley studied the two of them, unsure of what to make of the situation, knowing how much he wanted his place to be with them instead of standing next to Augustine. When he began to perspire, he blamed it on the rising sun baking the humidity from the early morning air more than his anxiety. He inhaled, sharply dragging the breath.

>After bringing the hoarding beings to a standstill just inside the door, Augustine commented absently, "not one Warrior ever made it this far. You two should be very proud of yourselves."

>Trying to ignore the connotations of the entire remark, Wesley simply shook his head. "I am just a bystander, Sir. 'The reason firm, the temperate will'... She'll convince him the talisman will be his protection."

>"The talisman? Oh no, Wyndham-Price. The mark on his hand is nothing more than a scab from the healing process. He will continue or cease to exist based upon his core. I cured him because he wanted to live, not for his own purposes, but because he believes he is useful. Perhaps not to himself, but to someone and he is willing to serve. You hold this same conviction. Yours was nurtured, to a great extent, and it will always be a part of who you've become. His? We'll see..."

>"Please, Sir?" He admonished himself for that same needy tone, the same phrase. A year, and nothing had changed... "You can do magic," he spoke.

>"YOU can do magic, Wyndham-Price. It may not be your strong suit, but what purpose do you think it will hold at this moment? To save Angel from the effects of the sun, only to have him destroyed anyway by what I'm about to do? No, Wesley. I could not allow him the easy way out a year ago, and I will not give it to him now. I have given him all the help I'm going to."

>"But..."

>Augustine silently ushered the beings into formation around the courtyard while he considered the look on his former pupil's face. "Ra thrasha ho'ash thrasha ma cha'mae. I'm surprised you didn't figure it out, Wesley. The language of Ancient Council. 'His agony heralds his rebirth', approximately."

>"But why resurrect him only to let him die! Please, Sir, I BEG you."

>"His faith, Wesley. But you don't think he'll find it?" Augustine's heart sank when the young man solemnly shook his lowered head. "Well, then, perhaps this is not so much a matter of his faith as your own."

>"Close your eyes." When she looked at him, confused, Angel added, "just in case. So it's not the last way you see me."

>The roar of the horde fell away to silence as Angel took hold of her palms. Cordelia closed her fingers gently, one by one, until her grasp was as firm as his and then she pulled him gently forward.

>He studied her, the look on her face, hoping she wouldn't make the mistake of peeking. And the sunlight seemed to swallow her whole. Cordelia took one, then another step back. Day highlighted the dark of her hair, the quality of her complexion and then, slowly, slowly it fell at her wrists.

>And she held him a little more tightly.

>He wanted to step forward, aware, that his last vision should be of Cordelia and her face, so unassuming. But, instinct took over and he stopped. Trying to pull back, his eyes closed, fear unrestrained, stronger than he had ever tried to fight for his existence before--she still wouldn't let go. Her grasp never loosened while she waited for him to believe.

>He fought fear as much as anything he had ever battled against in his life and then, he took the deepest breath he ever didn't need to take a look within.

>To find Peace. And right along side of it, the teensiest grain of Faith.

>When he reclaimed his vision, Angel was in the center of the immense expanse with Cordelia tugging on his wrists. The ninety beings remained hushed while the olive trees encircling the area seemed to speak a language all their own.

>"He owes me. Big time," Cordelia whispered, breaking the unearthly silence.

>Time seemed to stall and, except for a few errant leaves, very little was moving at all. Not one of the ninety dark grey vertical smudges budged. Angel studied the scene, turning to Augustine only to see another grey smudge holding onto the pearly white stone. When he looked to Cordelia, then Wesley, Angel was awed by their shimmering appearances and, after noticing his reflection in Wesley's lenses, he realized that he shimmered, too.

>All of them the same shimmer Doyle had been.

>"Angel, what's wrong?" Cordelia asked, worried. She stroked his shoulder tenderly, but it didn't seem to help and she looked to her associate. "Do something, Wesley," she pleaded as she blinked back her tears.

>Bending down with them, Wesley reached across and grasped her arms, peering into her face. "He'll be alright, Cordelia," he promised, leaning over Angel and pulling Cordy close. "Just hold on, and he'll be alright."

>The sky turned a dark shade of crimson as the approaching roar obstructed all sound from the earth. Sheltered by Cordelia and Wesley, Angel buried his face into the curve of his arms and looked for wherever that sliver of Peace had gone...

>After glancing back at the being he had always known as Augustine, Wesley leaned in a little more to hold Cordelia's arms in place. He was pretty sure he was trying to pray despite the combination allergypanic attack that was setting on, but a chorus of voices kept distracting him...

>
It was the coolest thing Cordelia had ever seen in her life and she watched every second of it all, thrilled by the spectacle. Augustine stood in the center of the courtyard as a ray of sunlight touched the stone to make it glow in colors she had never seen before, but she was pretty sure she'd love to own. There were too many shards of light to imagine as each began to dance like a spray of bubbles from a wand. They twisted softly at first, gathering momentum until they connected into a spiraling mass of light, of perfect sound, and soothing warmth. Complimenting those was a feeling of beauty--as if something so gorgeous could actually be touched.

>
The resulting cyclone spread until it reached the first rim of beings, the second, and then the final before gusting in through the open doors of the building, its crystal purity becoming muddy with the destruction of the damned. The beings became aware of their fate just before they lost their existences, their tormented cries drowned out by a syphoning sound--like a straw drawing the last bit out of a white heart-rimmed cup--before their filth swept up and into the Los Angeles morning sky.

>
The event complete, Cordelia nodded to its co-ordinator. The gem, spent, sparked before it completely disintegrated and Augustine smiled a cute old guy smile before he also sparked completely away, secure with the fact he had genuinely impressed.

>
Angel was pretty sure they had been there for, like, hours before he noticed the return of silence, then sound--theirs, their hearts whispering in his ears. Cordelia was there, finger-combing the hair at his nape while Wesley softly hummed. And when Angel finally stirred, they broke apart from him.

>
But only very slightly.

>
"Are you alright?" Wesley asked tentatively. "Both of you?"

>
Raising his face in time to see Cordelia smile, her radiance relaxed Angel in a way he had never experienced before. A thousand

thoughts converged on his mind all at once but the only one that escaped was, "I think I officially need to freak."

>
She laughed, that little-girl bubbly, rather obnoxious, laugh of hers and then smacked him across the arm before scooting away. "THAT was soooooo cool, Angel! You should have seen it!"

>
Angel looked at Cordelia, bewildered. She worried him to no end but he was pretty sure he could do that more effectively once his head was back on straight, at least for him.

>
The walk through the facilities had been eerie. It was devoid of all life, like there had never been any around to begin with. Wesley shuddered at the remembrance while he uploaded the contents of the mainframe into cyberspace, with hope the connection was secure.

>
"I don't know," he spoke softly when the last of the files sifted away. "Perhaps it would be best just to destroy all of this. So that it's lost forever, just to be forgotten."

>
Rolling his head about his shoulders, Angel exhaled sharply then reminded himself he didn't need to breathe. He wasn't in any mental shape to actually get into a moral debate. "It's not like they're the only ones doing this, Wesley. Besides, you don't think this organization's got the information stored in a bunch of databases throughout the world? If Council can create a Slayer, why shouldn't everyone be allowed to try?" He winced; that last comment physically hurt his brain.

>
"Got one!" Cordelia pointed to her monitor. "Your demon ex, Wesley. That DGal is one prima computer saboteur. She was the only person I could find online at this time in the morning to come up with a virus."

>
"Saboteur," Angel repronounced.

>
"Yeah, Angel. Whatever, Mr. LanguageLab."

>
With the final file uploaded, Wesley huffed and set the virus loose on the system. Following the strange glitches that began to appear he chided, "her name is Gale, Cordelia. Your continued use of these derogatory terms..."

>
"Relax, Wes," Angel sighed. "That's her chat name--DGal. She left it on the computer at work in case you ever wanted to chat."

>
Cordy arced her arms with long fluid reaches after she stood up. "And you do realize, Wesley, once you get your hands on all this information, you have a choice to keep it or SmokingMan it. Hey, Angel, remember when I dated Council's WeirdScienceBoy? Gerard was cute. At least The Council was going for good-looking. That ought to count for something, ya think?"

>
Wesley didn't attempt to hide his contempt. "Seriously, Cordelia. Have you just about dated everyone?" Absently rubbing his arm as they walked to the front of the building, he realized he had never felt so physically great in his life. "Not only was Gerard good-looking--not that I, personally noticed, only what I've been told... You must realize, of course, Angel, Gerard's whole existence was very hushed. It wasn't until you mentioned him to me that I even understood--"

>
"Wes. You don't have to make excuses for Council. It's the sign of the times. Man creates man. Man recreates man," Angel added, thumbing at himself. "There's no difference who does it, the results are always going to be the same."

>
"But they're not the same, Angel." Wesley held the door open as they exited into the parking lot, amazed by how easily Angel stepped out into the broad daylight without a second thought. "Council has a very narrow definition of life. VERY narrow. Technically, in their eyes, even you're alive."

>
"Gerard has a soul?" Bobbing her head approvingly, Cordelia acclaimed, "definitely explains the cute factor..."
>
"Cordelia! A soul has nothing to do with attractiveness... I mean, yes, on a certain level, I suppose you could argue that beauty comes from within and if there's nothing going on inside..."

>
"Words, Wesley. Too many words!"
>
While waiting for his associates to join him in the care, Angel took a moment to study his hand. "So, you guys, how long do you think THIS is going to last?"
>
Lounging across the back seat, Wesley replied, "I have no idea. Perhaps it's done everything its supposed to do and by tomorrow morning it'll be ineffective."
>
Angel blinked at Cordelia. "You wanna go to Disneyland?"

>
Cordy blinked back. "Magic Mountain. Wesley's been wanting to go to Magic Mountain."
>
Wesley raised his eyebrows expectantly when Angel glanced back. "You realize that I'm still really wigged and probably NOT going to be much fun."
>
"Well, duh!" Cordy smacked Angel's thigh after releasing the parking brake. "But it'll be good for you to do something different before you head deep down under. Since you haven't done the whole dark broody thing in a while, no thanks to Wesley, you'll probably be gone for weeks. Hey! That'll give Wesley time to help me study for my audition."
>
"No way! I've got just as much meditation to do as Angel. Maybe I'll be gone for weeks, too."
>
"Nope. Sorry, Wes. You haven't accrued any vacation time yet. You'll have to stay with Cordelia."
>
"No fair! We don't even have any cases to handle--"

>
"Pfffffffffff! Oh, there're cases, Wesley. Three. You thought I was just going to let you live in Angel's apartment and drive his car and have you hover? I don't think so. You're meeting one of 'em tomorrow at ten and then you'll have all afternoon to help me read."

>
"Angel!"
>
He really hated to hear whining. Especially from an Englishman, but Angel let it entertain, more than annoy him. "By the way, Cordelia. That envelope I gave you--"
>
"The one I refused to look at?" As she pulled out of the parking lot, she knew that would ease Angel's mind. At least, a little. "In your journal. Hey, so check it out! You'll be even less fun with a third degree burn so I'm gonna stop at the drug store and pick up some, like, SPF 2000 if they've got it. You have cash, right, Angel? What am I asking. You always have cash. And you're cool, right. You don't need a snack or anything. You hungry, Wes? I can drive thru. Your choice." When there was no answer from the back seat, she shook her head, disgusted. "I've never known anyone who falls asleep faster in the car. I'm amazed he can even drive..."
>
Angel ignored her voice while he staring out the window at the very bright spring day, at the seasonal jacaranda trees exploding lavender against the pale blue sky. There was color everywhere--reds, golds, more shades of purple than he could ever remembered, and those thirsty Southern California greens.
>
Augustine's voice drifted through his memory while Cordelia described her shopping spree. Shortly after referring to them all as 'servants', the ancient being then explained the reasoning behind the education in repetition. Glad to be cured, being near-death again

wasn't an experience Angel was looking forward to repeating any time soon. Added to that list was pissing Kate off anymore, meeting anyone else from Council or Wolfram & Hart clientele. Oh yeah, he concluded as he put on the sunglasses Cordelia had given him as a gift, abduction. And he could really do without ever being tortured again.

>
Given his immortality and previous track record, there was no way he could avoid them all; but at least the odds were in his favor that most weren't bound to happen anytime in the near future.

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>
Augustine watched her from a distance, her features alight with animation as Cordelia talked up a storm with a sculptured hand perched atop a block of marble. She seemed oblivious to the beings that mulled around the memorial park in the twilight; or perhaps, he realized, she was just giving a performance. At any rate, he continued to study her and, upon his approach, was mildly shocked to discern another shimmering presence separate from hers before it completely disappeared.

>
"Walty!" she exclaimed, scrunching her crossed legs closer to allow him a place on the bench.

>
"Miss Chase."

>
The stars overhead seemed to dance across the depths of her shining hair and her ambient face displayed the wonder of a child. Augustine was in awe, pretty sure he had fallen in love. It took him a moment before he realized he had unconsciously handed her the envelope he had brought.

>
"For Wesley. See that he receives it, but make it seem 'found'. I'm not sure he's ready to accept everything it contains, but he'll see soon enough after he opens it what it's about. How are they, by the way? Wesley and Angel?"

>
Cordelia wound and unwound the brown button tie on the back of the envelope while she excitedly gave a run-down on the week passed. She got the lead role in the play she auditioned for, Wesley was busy with a couple of cases, and Angel--so unlike himself--kept coming upstairs to see what was going on instead of hibernating like he was supposed to. She hadn't minded so much, but Angel's interference with his work had driven poor Wesley to the brink of threatening to quit.

>
Of course, she had to put her foot down and make them behave, but wasn't that what Office Managers were supposed to do?

>
Augustine had no reply while they gazed at the sky together. When Cordelia's sudden outburst of laughter disturbed the peaceful silence, he eyed her discreetly. She was enchanted, this one, as she batted at the shimmer that had returned from wherever it went and he paused to speculate if Miss Chase would find it a compliment to be told she was the most beautiful old woman he knew.

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>
Epilogue:

>
...He felt her presence as She entered his quarters, but he couldn't bring himself to turn 'round to face Her, afraid that failure would be plainly evident upon his face. It was pointless, he considered, to attempt to hide the truth from Her. She was intuitive, this one; and seemed to know his thoughts before he formed them.

>
The sunset grew more radiant with the sun nestling behind the tree line, making the grove seem as if on fire. "Passion," She commented idly as She approached him. "The sky is alight with passion."

>
Her voice, dulcet and finely-trained English, surrounded him to provide some comfort. "I--," was all he could manage, his remorse causing his throat to pinch tightly. But, like always, She seemed to know what he meant and Her hand clenched softly on the cap of his arm before She stepped to the edge of the balcony.

>
"You should have let me go in your stead," She spoke in profile. "In the end, it was what you needed to do--or not. Whatever occurred, Eruwalt, was best for this moment."

>
"Rosalie begged for his life." When She turned to face him, Her face was serene, understanding. "And then she offered to me her hand," he confessed woefully.

>
She seemed to consider his words carefully, again without further need for explanation. "And you considered staying," She stated flatly, without accusation in the tone. "I would have missed you terribly."

>
He smiled wanly before the first of a flood of tears poured from his eyes. "I could not take his life. I failed my Calling. Council. You. The catastrophe I have set into motion--"

>
"Will be righted one day, my dear friend." She knelt at his side and drew his trembling hands into Her steady ones. Set against the walnut tone of her skin, her green eyes seemed more animated than usual. "I see no failure, Eruwalt, and neither should you. This experience has change you tremendously, not for as wrought as you may believe."

>
"And my Peers? What do they see?"

>
She inhaled a deep breath that belied Her age, cupping his face affectionately. "Censure. You will be renounced. They will title you Council Elder, but you will hold no esteem, your Vision will be disregarded and you must hold silent, Eruwalt."

>
"How? To walk these halls as more than a lesser being--as if mortal--when that is not the case?"

>
"Then make it the case. You are not without your means. Think of it as thus: an old man who will not die becomes a fixture; a young man that does not age becomes a mystery."

>
"Your wisdom--"

>
"Is your wisdom, Eruwalt. What you have taught me. What you will continue to teach these young. We gain insight through our experiences, our decisions, and I refuse to believe the teacher cannot appreciate his own lessons. It will take time, but this all will pass and your heart will mend."

>
"My heart, Lady, should have never been bared and now it is gone forever."

>
"Oh," she giggled. "That is where you are wrong. How were you expected to live among the imperfection of humanity without, one day, falling prey to it? Rosalie Cort will always be within you, but she will be far from the last. You now possess the most intimate knowledge of where their human hearts have been and where they will continue to go. Humanity has tainted you, Eruwalt Augustine. Embrace your good fortune and begin to move on..."

>
Augustine stared at the creature who stared back at him and he checked the apartment number again just to make sure he was in the right place. When the blond being apathetically shrugged before moving along, Augustine accepted the open door as his invitation to stroll in.

>
He liked the layout of the tidy room with the curving staircase sweeping up to a loft. The burnished browns, warm-toned tile inlays, and oxidized iron trimmings gave the place an overall masculine feeling. The books on the shelves amused him to no end and he picked up the volume from the table in front of him.

>
"DIANETICS". Augustine refrained from forming an opinion.

>
"Spike, I thought I told you to get out!" the annoyed British voice called from beyond the hallway, backed by the sound of rushing water. "OH!"

>
"Rupert." Augustine smiled, eyeing his former pupil from head to toe. "All my boys have gotten so old."

>
"Yes, well..." Flustered for a moment, Rupert Giles strode to the counter separating his kitchen from the living room to refresh his drink. Miming 'cheers' with his glass, he swallowed the bitter liquid in one gulp before refilling it. He didn't bother with formalities, knowing Augustine wouldn't mind if he continued to drink alone.

>
"You seemed so surprised to see me. Although, it's not like I told Wyndham-Price I was actually coming to visit. He probably thinks I'm dead, anyway."

>
"Wyndham-Price?" Swirling the amber liquid, Giles felt his face flush with rage. "You would think he'd have given a ring anyway, wouldn't you? Twit," he added under his breath. "So, you've obviously seen his new living arrangements?"

>
"Oh, he doesn't live with the vampire. But, yes. I met Angel AND Cordelia. What a lovely girl she is. So charming and vivacious!"

>
"Among other things." Giles heaved his impatience, tired of standing, but not really wanting the company enough to invite the older-looking man to sit down. "You didn't come all this way to chat about the three Angelenos."

>
"Actually. I wanted to meet your Slayer. Is she expected?" He was finding it difficult to read the myriad of expressions that swept across Giles' face. Actually, the one. Augustine never fathomed how easily one person could emote so many facets of exasperation. "I take it she's not coming by, then"

>
"In case senility has set on during the course of your immortality, Eruwalt, I no longer am in possession of a Slayer. She was--"

>
"Yes, yes, Rupert. Don't get sprung. I just thought that, while I was passing through, it might be nice to meet the other Slayer. Perhaps some other time."

>
He took the continued display of hostility as his cue to leave and walked himself to the door, noticing the acoustic guitar on its stand. "You know, Rupert, forgiveness is a wonderful thing and rather cathartic. You had a destiny to contend with before you could tackle anything else and I'm done apologizing about preventing you from leading a secular life."

>
"And, this 'destiny' of mine, SIR... Did you happen to SEE at what point the life I'm leading at this moment begins to improve?" His unforgiving glare accented the unattractive silence. "Just what I thought you'd 'prophecy'. GET. OUT."

>
"Well... Do ring Wyndham-Price, won't you? Sometimes keeping in touch with an old acquaintance can be rather cathartic, also."

>
Eruwalt Augustine gently pulled the door closed behind him as he left. He paused in the courtyard of the lovely apartment building for a second to admire the wafting scent of the seasonal jasmine. And then, as if to announce the coming storm, the harsh sound of glass against wood shattered the mood.

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>
Author 'speaks' again:

>
Here are a few additional notes: There is a song I found right before the final/final editing: "Resurrection" by Terrence Trent d'Arby off of his "VIBRATOR" CD. Now, mind you, this is a CD that

never seems to be in its jewel box when I'm wanting to listen to it, but that particular morning, there it was. I don't write with music in mind, but the energy and wording of the song kinda blew me away and made me think: Angel! 'Aurora's' title, which never wanted to come to me for any reason, finally came to mind with the song. Much thanks to TTD and, dude! When the hell is that next CD coming out?

>
Other songs: during Angel's vigil with Cordy & Doyle, there is a wonderful song on Afro Celt Sound System's 'Volume 2: Release' by the name of "Ã%ireann" that seems to fit the occasion nicely. It is not so down-tempo as one might expect for the scene, but the words are almost perfectly tailored and I like how it ties in with Angel being a Warrior. Dido's 'Take my Hand', a suggestion from 'Cherub' still fits. Until further notice, consider that one the Angel/Cordy theme song.

>
I wanted to include Wesley's poem during the body of the piece, but there was no way to add it without bogging down the pace of the story. I had been trying to choose just the right poem for months on end. This is actually the first one I found and I put it aside, thinking, "so, NOT Cordy". But, then 'Necromonger', 'Cherub', and 'Closure' occurred and by the time I finished 'Disruptor', Cordy WAS the poem. She is as precious as her men think she is. Mind you, Wesley is 'channeling' Angel while he's reciting it, which makes the wording all that more poignant:

>
PHANTOM OF DELIGHT by William Wordsworth

>
She was a Phantom of delight When first she gleamed upon my sight;

>
A lovely Apparition, sent To be a moment's ornament;

>
Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair; Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;

>
But all things else about her drawn From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;

>
A dancing Shape, an Image gay To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

>
I saw her upon nearer view, A Spirit, yet a Woman, too!

>
Her household motions light and free, And steps of virgin-liberty;

>
A countenance in which did meet Sweet records, promises as sweet;

>
A Creature not too bright or good For human nature's daily food;

>
For transient sorrows, simple wiles, Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles.

>
And now I see with eye serene The very pulse of the machine;

>
A Being breathing thoughtful breath, A Traveller between life and death;

>
The reason firm, the temperate will, Endurance, foresight, strength and skill;

>
A perfect Woman, nobly planned, To warn, to comfort, and command;

>
And yet a Spirit still, and bright With something of angelic light.

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>evancomo@netscape.net

>

End
file.